

FILE REVIEW



Left, from left to right: *Germany 09*, a collage of short films by 13 German directors; *The Milk of Sorrow*, directed by Claudia Llosa; *Yang Yang*, directed by Cheng Yu-chieh.

Below: *Night of an Era* traces the history of rock music in China.

Bottom: *Good Bye Lenin!*, directed by Wolfgang Becker.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TAIPEI FILM FESTIVAL

This year's Taipei Film Festival (台北電影節) celebrates the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall with an 18-day program that focuses on the rich history of Germany's capital city.

The festival, founded in 1998, is an important showcase for local productions, which for the most part miss out on the Hong Kong- and China-dominated Golden Horse Awards (金馬獎). This year 141 films are being screened, from feature films and documentaries to animations and shorts.

Each year the festival showcases films from a different country. This year it takes viewers on a cinematic journey through the history of Berlin from the 1930s to the present day.

Among the earlier films are Slatan Dudow's *Current Problems: How the Berlin Worker Lives* (1930). Massive unemployment, hyperinflation and other economic problems that contributed to the collapse of the Weimar Republic are addressed in this documentary, as well as in Dudow's debut feature film *Kuhle Wampe: To Whom Does the World Belong?* (1931), which was scripted by left-wing playwright and theater director Bertolt Brecht. Both works are known as pioneering proletarian films. Also from this period is future Hollywood director Billy Wilder's *People on Sunday* (1929), which paints a portrait of everyday life in Berlin and is among the earliest examples of independent cinema in Germany.

Covering the early post-war years is *The Murderers Are Among Us* (1946), the first and greatest of the *Trümmerfilme*, or "rubble films," bleak works shot literally in the rubble of Germany's war-ravaged cities. Its director, Wolfgang Staudte, and art director, Otto Hunte, both worked on *Jud Suss*, the most notorious anti-Semitic movie made in Nazi Germany.

East German productions include the teen-centered romance flick *Hot Summer* (1968); *After Winter Comes Spring* (1988), a film about a railway journey that explores the lives of women of different ages, social statuses and cultural backgrounds; and *Coming Out* (1989), East Germany's first and only gay movie.

Homosexuality is a popular theme among local film festivalgoers, and this year's program also features Germany's first homosexual movie, *Girls in Uniform* (1931), which was banned during the Third Reich; and *Aimee and Jaguar* (1999), a love story between a housewife and a Jewish woman involved in a resistance organization.

Moving on to contemporary times, *Germany 09* (2009) is a collective effort by 13 well-known directors musing on current social and political issues. The film is a direct offspring of *Germany in Autumn* (1978), a collage of shorts by top filmmakers including Volker Schlöndorff and Rainer Werner Fassbinder that offered critical perspectives on Red Army Faction terrorism in the 1970s.

Several filmmakers are highlighted in the German segment. In the semi-autobiographical *The All-Round Reduced Personality — Outtakes* (1977), which blends documentary with fiction, pioneering feminist director Helke Sander asks how a single mother could pursue her artistic ambitions, participate in social causes, and put bread on the table, all at the same time. Sander's two-part documentary *Liberators Take Liberties* (1991 and 1992) examines the rape and assault of an estimated 100,000 German women by Red Army soldiers during their advance on Berlin in 1945.

Helma Sanders-Brahms, German's best-known female director and a prominent figure in New German Cinema, will visit Taipei to screen her 1979 masterpiece, *Germany, Pale Mother*, as well as *Beloved Clara* (2008).

East Berlin-born Andreas Dresen is noted for his sober and sometimes-humorous portraits of ordinary people caught in

Taipei Film Festival shines the spotlight on Berlin

Berlin



Above, *Raging Sun, Raging Sky*, directed by Julian Hernandez; below right, *Disgrace*, directed by Steve Jacobs; bottom right, *Dark Harbor*, directed by Takatsugu Naito; below left, *Wheat Harvest*, a controversial film by Chinese director Xu Tong about sex workers in Beijing; bottom left, *How Are You, Dad*, directed by Chang Tso-chi.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TAIPEI FILM FESTIVAL

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BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER



terrible dilemmas. His *Cloud 9* is a compelling story about love, passion and betrayal that besets a trio of characters at the sunset of their lives. It tackles the theme of sexuality in old age and includes explicit scenes.

Non-German films on the international program include a batch of movies from Latin America. *Meet the Head of Juan Perez* opens with the severed head of a circus magician recalling what caused its separation from the rest of its body. Peruvian director Claudia Llosa's second feature *The Milk of Sorrow*, winner of the Golden Bear award at this year's Berlin Film Festival, evokes magical realism in its tale of a daughter's deeply buried secrets and fear.

The latest works of film masters can be found in the City Vision section, which includes Atom Egoyan's *Adoration*, Claude Chabrol's *Bellamy* and *Bluebeard* by Catherine Breillat.

Opponents of globalization will want to check out the hilarious and shocking documentaries *The Yes Men and The Yes Men Fix the World*, in which gungo activists successfully pose as corporate and government spokespersons. Mike Bonanno, one of the directors, will attend the festival for question-and-answer sessions.

The festival's international competition for emerging directors includes films by Taiwan's Cheng Yu-chieh (鄭有傑) and Chung Mong-hong (鍾孟宏). Also vying for the NT\$600,000 grand prize is Cannes-winner Pablo Aguirre with *Salamandra*, about a boy raised in a hippie commune in Patagonia. Another strong competitor, *Disgrace*, examines the lingering impacts of apartheid policies in South Africa. It was directed by American actor-turned-director Steve Jacobs and stars John Malkovich.

This year also marks the 30th anniversary of King Hu's (胡金銓) kung-fu masterpieces *Legend of the Mountain* (山中傳奇) and *Raining in the Mountain* (空山靈雨). There will be screenings of both films and an exhibition at the Red House (雨紅樓) of the late maestro's film manuscripts, drawings, production photographs and other rarely seen documents.

German directors Wolfgang Becker, Sanders-Brahms and Martin Koerber, head of the film department at Filmmuseum Berlin, will hold a panel discussion at the German Cultural Center on Monday.

For more information, go to the festival's bilingual Web site at www.taipeiff.org.tw. As of press time, the Web site's English-language section was not fully operational.

FESTIVAL NOTES:

WHAT: 11th Taipei Film Festival (2009 台北電影節)
WHEN: Today to July 12
WHERE: Taipei Zhongshan Hall (台北市中山堂), 98, Yanping S Rd, Taipei City (台北市延平南路98號) and Taipei Shin Kong Cinplex (台北新光影城), 4F, 36, Xining S Rd, Taipei City (台北市西寧南路36號4樓)
ADMISSION: NT\$120 for weekday matinee screenings (before 6pm); NT\$200 for weeknight and weekend screenings
ON THE NET: www.taipeiff.org.tw

Changes to Taipei Awards stir controversy

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

While other cinephiles are celebrating the latest installment of the Taipei Film Festival (台北電影節), Ryan Cheng (鄭秉謙) is using his blog (blog.chinatimes.com/davidleean) to bemoan recent changes made to the festival's structure under Jane Yu (游惠貞), who has been in charge of programming since 2007.

At the top of Cheung's list of what's wrong with the Taipei Film Festival is his concern about the relatively high number of local distributors' films shown in the festival that had or will have commercial releases in Taiwan. "Ordinary audiences don't pay much attention to whether or not a curator puts a great amount of effort and time into building a good lineup. In my view, Yu chooses [the easy] route. The number of distributors' films is proportionally too high," said Cheng, a film critic and a doctoral candidate at the University of Leicester in the UK.

Ordinarily, the partnership between film festivals and distributors is tight but invisible to the audience. It may be detected though, when selected works do not fit with the



festivals' themes. This is the case in this year's Directors in Focus section, with US director Rob Epstein's four documentaries on homosexuality, all of which will be released by Flash Forward Entertainment (前景娛樂), Kazakhstan-born Sergey Dvortsevoy's feature debut *Tulpan*, to be released by Joint Entertainment International (佳映娛樂), and documentaries *Bread Day* and *Highway*, both shown at the Taiwan International Documentary Festival, which was curated by Yu in 1998 and 2000.

The section had been previously reserved for directors from the chosen country of the year.

Yu does not think working with distributors is a problem. "Unless you are talking about underground or student films, virtually all the films that exist have distributors. So why pretend that the film festival is not part of the industry?" she said.

Asked why non-German directors are being highlighted this year, Yu said she believes in taking advantage of an opportunity to introduce quality works to local audiences. "The festival is here to stay. But when you see the chance to screen the films you love, you'd better do it right away because the opportunity may not present itself in the future," Yu said.

Cheng's other qualm with the government-funded event stems from when the Taipei Cultural Foundation (台北市文化基金會) became the festival's permanent executive body last year, with Department of Cultural Affairs Commissioner Lee Yong-ping (李永萍) as its chief executive officer.

Changes that followed included the removal of the experimental film category from the Taipei Awards, an annual competition and an important platform for young filmmakers in Taiwan. There are more award categories for feature-length works at this year's Taipei Awards, and the top prize of NT\$1 million — which had previously been open to all types of films — is now limited to feature-length works.

Past winners of this prize include documentaries *Let It Be* (無樂) and *Farewell 1999* (再會吧！一九九九), an animated short, *Women* (女子), and experimental film *Stardust 15749001* (星塵15749001).

"The spirit of the festival is openness, diversity and creativity. By favoring feature works over others, the event loses what makes it unique and commendable," said Cheng, who has served as a jury member for film projects funded by the National Culture and Arts Foundation.

Cheng's viewpoint is supported by the Documentary Media Worker Union (台北市紀錄片從業人員職業工會), which issued a statement condemning what it says were arbitrary changes made without public explanation and calling for the restoration of the original award categories.

"These changes can only make the Taipei Awards a smaller Golden Horse Awards (金馬獎) at best," said Tsai Tsung-lung (蔡崇隆), an executive board member of the union and a filmmaker whose documentary *Surviving Evil* (油症—與毒共存) has been selected for this year's Taipei Awards.

Yu believes a film festival should adapt to changing times, and says the Taipei Film Festival now favors feature films in keeping with the revival of Taiwanese cinema.

The award ceremony will be broadcast live online, and more attention will be given to stars and actors.

"The event is having a definite change of direction after 10 years ... the Taipei Awards is becoming the only major platform for local feature films," Yu said, "because we hardly see [any] Taiwanese films at the Golden Horse Awards now."

OTHER RELEASES

► COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

Ong Bak 2

Thai martial arts icon Tony Jaa also directs this sequel to the well-received martial arts film from 2003. Jaa tells his character's back story in a film centered around vengeance and punctuated by chest-thumping hand-to-hand combat. But serious production problems, including Jaa's disappearance as the film went over budget, are as interesting as anything on screen. Some reviewers also disliked the "to be continued" finale. Not to be confused with *Tom Yum Goong* (2005), also starring Jaa, which was released in some English-language markets as *Ong Bak 2*. The Chinese title, for similar reasons, has this new film as "part 3."



Portrait of a Beauty

In the hands of author Lee Jeong-myung, famed 18th-century Korean artist Hyewon became a woman who impersonated a man while producing works of considerable sensuality. Director Jeon Yun-su (*Le Grand Chef*) has made the most of this opportunity to create another sumptuous South Korean period piece revolving around court jealousies and intrigue. Like *Frozen Flower*, a Korean historical epic released here a few weeks ago, this has a restricted rating because of sex scenes.



Ground Zero: The Deadly Shift

Semi-legendary low-budget director and part-time wrestler Fred Olen Ray (*Hollywood Chainsaw Hookers*) finally gets a movie into Taiwanese theaters after almost 40 years — albeit a direct-to-cable-in-the-US effort. A nuclear explosion in the Middle East sets off cataclysmic natural forces that imperil the world, and our hero scientists must respond quickly before the magnetism of the Earth's poles goes haywire. Also known as *Polar Opposites*, presumably because the story has nothing to do with Sept. 11. See if you can spot the footage lifted from *Dante's Peak* in the trailer online. Starts tomorrow.

