

FILM REVIEW

The importance of not being too earnest

'Little Ashes' engages in a constant struggle to break out of the category of gay interest film and make a credible stab at being a serious biopic

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER



While the names of Federico Garcia Lorca, Salvador Dali and Luis Bunuel are familiar to anyone with an interest in modern literature and the visual arts, their personal histories are less widely known than those of artists of comparable stature from Northern Europe. *Little Ashes* claims to tell the trio's story, beginning with their years as fashionable undergraduates in Madrid and tracing their emergence as leading artistic figures in the period preceding the rise of General Francisco Franco and the execution of Garcia Lorca. Though the subject matter is interesting, director Paul Morrison seems uncertain about what story he wants to tell and how he wants to tell it.

The film opens with the arrival of the self-consciously artistic Dali at the Residencia de Estudiantes in Madrid, where Garcia Lorca and Bunuel are already established as members of the university's artistic avant-garde. Robert Pattinson, who has attained a cult-like teenage girl following for his roles in the *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* series, is clearly intended to provide the eye candy, and even manages to deliver a realistic portrayal of the newcomer's mixture of arrogance and diffidence amidst the self-assured, if occasionally tortured, Garcia Lorca and Bunuel.

Unfortunately, Pattinson can do little else with the complexities of Dali's character, and consequently appears a child among grown-ups, especially when compared to Javier Beltran's nuanced interpretation of Garcia Lorca's growing awareness of his homosexuality. Beltran's portrayal of Garcia Lorca strives for the muted elegance and bitterness of Merchant Ivory Productions' 1987 film *Maurice*, with which it shares many thematic similarities. In addition to the complexities of juxtaposing Dali and Garcia Lorca's tentative progression towards a homosexual relationship with Spain's spiral into violent and intolerant fascism, Morrison also attempts to examine the trio's artistic work.

Unfortunately, this exploration of the aesthetic is mostly window dressing and does not serve any real purpose. The film also fails in its use of language. *Little Ashes* is an English film about Spanish artists and, to provide the proper local color, all characters speak in

Film Notes

LITTLE ASHES

DIRECTED BY:
PAUL MORRISON

STARRING:
JAVIER BELTRAN (FEDERICO GARCIA LORCA), ROBERT PATTINSON (SALVADOR DALI), MATTHEW MCNULTY (LUIS BUNUEL), MARINA GATELL (MARGARITA)

RUNNING TIME:
112 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

rather ridiculous Castilian-accented English, with Pattinson's attempts sometimes verging on caricature. Readings of Garcia Lorca's poetry, which play a prominent role in the film, are delivered in Spanish with an English voice-over, a particularly clumsy way of presenting poetry in another language. Moreover, the readings are not even well integrated into the story. Sporadic imagery from Dali's paintings feels similarly out of place, and the inclusion of the famous eyeball-slicing scene from the Dali-Bunuel collaboration, *An Andalusian Dog*, is clearly no more than a ham-handed attempt at shock tactics. Additionally, Morrison fails to adequately delve into the political and cultural forces driving the prevailing mood of iconoclasm, content to rely on throwaway images of fascist atrocities and caricatures of stuffy old art professors in their oak paneled rooms. *Little Ashes* is instead more interested in the theme of romantic betrayal and the ensuing rift between Garcia Lorca and Dali, an estrangement partly engineered, according to Morrison, by Bunuel. *Little Ashes* gives these romantic entanglements precedent over compelling storylines such as Dali's betrayal of his own genius and the motivation behind the execution of the politically neutral Garcia Lorca.

As such, while *Little Ashes* engages in a constant struggle to break out of the category of gay interest film and make a credible stab at being a serious biopic, it never quite achieves its goal.

The cast of 'Little Ashes' is easy on the eyes, but sometimes hard on the ears.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SKY DING ENTERTAINMENT



FILM REVIEW

A love story in silence

Blatant product placement for the Taipei City Government mars an otherwise enjoyable boy-meets-girl tale

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

As athletes from around the world prepare for the Deaflympics, scheduled to open in Taipei on Sept. 5, a group of pop idols and film professionals have assembled a feature film to coincide with the event. Helmed by up-and-coming director Cheng Fen-fen (鄭芬芬), *Hear Me* (聽說) tells an enjoyable boy-meets-girl story, but adds a twist to the classic tale by introducing hearing-impaired characters and making extensive use of sign language.

The film opens with a swim team training for the upcoming Deaflympics. Hearing-impaired Hsiao Peng (Michelle Chen, 陳妍希) is one of the team's best swimmers. Her younger sister Yang Yang (Ivy Chen, 陳意涵) drops by the pool every day to support her, all the while working odd jobs so that Hsiao Peng can concentrate on her training.

Also a pool regular, Tian Kuo (Eddie Peng, 彭于晏), a happy young man, delivers lunchboxes to the athletes and is soon attracted to the equally cheerful Yang Yang. The pair communicate through sign language and develop deep feelings for one another.

Things take a turn for the worse, however, when, after a late night date with Kuo, Yang Yang comes home to discover that Hsiao Peng has been hospitalized for smoke inhalation caused by a fire next door. Blaming herself for the accident, Yang Yang decides to stop seeing Kuo. Despite Yang Yang's resistance, the

Film Notes

HEAR ME 聽說

DIRECTED BY:
CHENG FEN-FEN (鄭芬芬)

STARRING:
EDDIE PENG (彭于晏) AS TIAN KUO, IVY CHEN (陳意涵) AS YANG YANG, MICHELLE CHEN (陳妍希) AS HSIAO PENG

RUNNING TIME:
109 MINUTES

RUNNING TIME:
MANDARIN, TAIWANESE AND SIGN LANGUAGE WITH CHINESE AND ENGLISH SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY



Pop idols Ivy Chen and Eddie Peng deliver gratifying performances in *Hear Me*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF FILM INTERNATIONAL

Taiwanese filmmakers often lack. Though many audience members may not be familiar with sign language, the main form of communication between the two protagonists, *Hear Me*'s carefully scripted narrative, comic relief and genuine emotional resonance quickly render this language barrier unimportant.

The film also earns extra points for its well-cast group of actors. Though Peng risks being typecast as a happy-go-lucky, good-natured guy, he stands out with his lovable antics and impressive comedic timing. Theater veteran Luo Bei-an (羅北安) and Golden Horse-winning actress Lin Mei-hsiu (林美秀) make adorable sidekicks

as Kuo's parents. Supported by Taipei City's Department of Cultural Affairs (台北市文化局) and the Taipei Organizing Committee of the 21st Summer Deaflympics, *Hear Me* is less a movie about sportsmanship and the world of the hearing-impaired than a lighthearted romance featuring young pop idols. The promotional motivations behind the movie become all too obvious at certain points, a prime example being the director's portrayal of Taipei as a city filled with extreme cyclists, skateboarders, street musicians and flamenco and hip-hop dancers, all of whom congregate in the outdoor squares of the upscale Xinyi District.

lovelorn Kuo does not give up on their budding romance. While his patience and determination eventually win the girl's heart, *Hear Me*'s ending is anything but predictable.

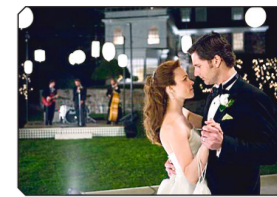
As demonstrated in her feature film debut, 2007's *Keeping Watch* (沉睡的青春), award-winning scriptwriter and director Cheng possesses the skill to tell a story gracefully, a talent young

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

The Time Traveler's Wife

Judiciously released on Chinese Valentine's Day, this film stars Rachel McAdams and Eric Bana, a loving couple cursed (or blessed?) by the latter's uncontrollable trips through time and space. As with the temporal hoppers in *The Terminator*, Bana slips in and out of the space-time continuum absolutely starkers, which proves to be more humorous here than dangerous. Will true love prevail in the end (or the beginning)? Critics saw through the holes immediately, but uncritical, lovelorn audiences might have a heartwarming time, especially because the leads are winning.



Let's Fall in Love (尋情歷險記)

Also making use of Chinese Valentine's Day is this up-close-and-personal Taiwanese documentary enjoying a proper release with a new promotional campaign. Twenty-odd married couples come under the spotlight with their relationship problems and weaknesses, together with the intriguing matchmaker-counselor whom all of them share. From award-winning director Wuna Wu (吳文輝), who had to solicit hundreds of small investors to get this film into theaters.



The Forbidden Legend: Sex & Chopsticks 2 (金瓶梅2: 愛的奴隸)

Sweaty and kinky sex for its own sake is a rare bird on the Taiwanese big screen these days. We haven't had a soft porn extravaganza since, well, the original *Sex & Chopsticks* late last year. Japanese hardcore actresses Hikaru Wakana (with head still shaved), Kaera Uehara, Serina Hayakawa and Yui Morikawa secure another Hong Kong work visa to tell, for the umpteenth time, the misadventures of barely robed courtesans. But tabletop fetishists will likely feel misled all over again; the Chinese title ("The Golden Lotus 2: Slaves of Love") is more faithful to what's on show.



Largo Winch

At last, a live-action movie based on a comic book that isn't Japanese. Largo Winch stands to inherit a fortune from a tycoon who rescued him from an orphanage. But money like that doesn't come easily if Daddy's ruthless business partners have designs of their own, including offing the man and preparing the same for his son. A mixture of office intrigue and globetrotting action, this French effort is something different for people who think they've seen everything.



Rookies: Graduation

And so, back to a movie based on a Japanese manga. A bunch of good-for-nothing punks regain self-respect and team spirit after their charismatic high school teacher shapes them into a formidable baseball team. This is a theatrical follow-up to a TV series based on the popular manga series *Rookies*. But unless you're a baseball tragic or swoon at the sight of "bad boys" with trendy shocks of hair and perfect skin, this attempt at inspiration won't mean a pitcher's mound of beans. *The Bad News Bears* it ain't.



Four Minutes

A German film from 2006, *Four Minutes* is also an inspirational movie, but with sobriety, depth and darkness. A dangerous new prisoner (played by the much-admired Hannah Herzsprung) at a women's correctional facility turns out to be a very talented piano player, catching the eye of the prisoners' aging music teacher and sparking heat in different directions. The film climaxes with the minutes of the title in a killer performance. Filled with surprising brutality, poignance and energy, this is a hands-down must-see for musicians, especially piano students who feel chained to their instruments.



Annie Leibovitz: Life Through a Lens

Made for PBS in the US as part of the series *American Masters*, this documentary on the iconic photographer is about three years old but could still be of interest. Packed full of celebrities, politicians and other recognizable faces, the story concentrates on Leibovitz's craft and success rather than the controversies in her action-packed life. It's not clear why the film would be released here now; Leibovitz is, after all, only in the news because of financial woes. Directed by the subject's sister, who clearly likes her. Starts tomorrow.



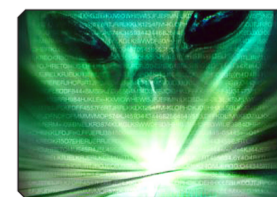
KJ (音樂人生)

The poster for this Hong Kong documentary says it all: a boy sitting alone in an auditorium. The boy is "KJ," a brilliant pianist with a bright future in store, though the film covers much wider, and occasionally darker, ground, which makes it an ideal companion to *Four Minutes*. With respected director Ann Hui (許鞍華) as consultant, this study of individual genius in a society that tends to stifle it has the stamp of quality. Six years in the making, *KJ* is screening exclusively at the Wonderful Cinemas complex in Taichung.



Planet Raptor

Made for TV, *Planet Raptor* is a galactic sequel to the unscreened-in-Taiwan *Raptor Island* and features a bunch of heavily armed humans doing battle with various dinosaur-like creatures. Truth be told, it all looks like a video game, but it is less than six degrees of separation from Sam Raimi and the *Evil Dead* series. Stars Steven Bauer and Ted Raimi. Screening at the Baixue theater in Ximending.



Good

Viggo Mortensen is a literature professor whose fictional treatment of euthanasia brings him to the attention of Nazis who need a professional apologist for breeding policies. The good professor subsequently, and reluctantly, climbs the ladder of regard and opportunity among monsters. Unlike *Eastern Promises*, Mortensen suffered poor reviews for his performance of a weak man succumbing to the banality of evil, as did the film generally. Based on the play.

