

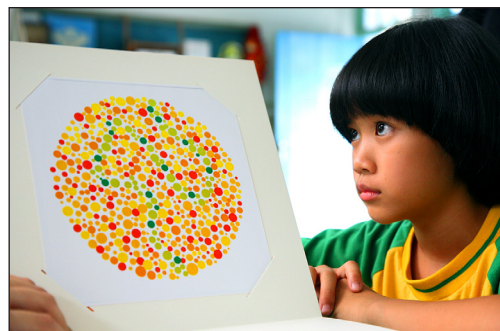
FILM REVIEW



Small town, big ambitions



The young cast members test their mettle to good effect in *Somewhere I Have Never Travelled*, a sad film about the stifling surroundings of a small town in southern Taiwan.



Where do you go when you live at the edge of the world?
BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Somewhere I Have Never Travelled (帶我去遠方), a film about the trials of growing up on the coast of southern Taiwan, is the debut feature of director Fu Tien-yu (傅天余), a protégé of the prolific playwright and director Wu Nien-chen (吳念真). The movie possesses many of the strengths and weaknesses of Wu's own work — a strong script combined with an excessively overt "Taiwanese" consciousness — but makes a solid effort to explore the experience of coming of age in small-town Taiwan, where the rest of the world seems hopelessly distant.

The film's unspecified coastal town, which might be in the Kaohsiung area (where some of the location shooting took place), appears to be a desperately bleak place in which to spend one's formative years. The ocean's unforgiving horizon offers nothing but emptiness and oblivion to Ah-Hsien, a young man discovering his homosexuality, and Ah-Gui, a girl who suffers from color blindness, an affliction that is not recognized or understood by those around her. The duo's travails constitute the bulk of the film's story line, though *Somewhere I Have Never Travelled* manages to be a good deal more interesting than this bald synopsis suggests.

The specter of "social issues" floats just beneath the surface of the film, but is fortunately kept in check by the director's overriding concern for her young non-professional actors as individual characters, not as vehicles through which to advance a social agenda. Ah-Hsien's homosexuality and Ah-Gui's color blindness seem just a trifle contrived and are ultimately superfluous, irrelevancies compared to the relentless isolation of their world.

Thankfully, Fu handles these issues in such a manner that they are not unduly intrusive, choosing to focus on the strong bond between the two friends. The movie contains many genuinely charming character interactions, as well as numerous expressions of unfiltered intimacy, when the two young people take solace in their shared sense of being different from those around them.

These moments are the highlight of the movie, and the duo's isolation is masterfully encapsulated by Fu's use of the bleakly beautiful coastal scenery, which speaks volumes about the circumscribed world the two protagonists inhabit. Their struggle is juxtaposed with the experiences of the cast of adult characters, who have grown accustomed to this limited existence. Ah-Gui's father, an alcoholic

street cleaner, still longs for the wife who left him years ago, and finds comfort in his collection of discarded shop store mannequins. Ah-Gui's burning desire to escape seems almost sweet when compared to her father's resigned acceptance of his fate. While Ah-Gui's dreams are entirely unrealistic, she continues to dream. For the adults, however, dreams have long since died, buried in a graveyard of shattered hopes and aspirations.

This "serious" tone, handled largely by the non-professional cast, is balanced by the impressive cameos of professional entertainers such as Mei Fang (梅芳) and Lin Mei-shiu (林美秀), who provide the film with a welcome dose of humor, as well as some linguistic color. The movie's more comedic sections are fun and, even if slightly contrived, work well in juxtaposition with the adolescent sullenness that characterizes much of the dialogue of the two leads.

While the film certainly does not lack charm, it is, at its core, a deeply sad film, though this poignancy is tarnished by Fu's tendency to melodramatically fawn over her talented young cast. Luckily, Fu had the sense to make *Somewhere I Have Never Travelled* an ensemble piece: as such, the deficiencies of the young actors are never too glaring and their more experienced peers are always available for backup.

Film Notes
SOMEWHERE I HAVE NEVER TRAVELLED
帶我去遠方
DIRECTED BY:
FU TIEN-YU (傅天余)
STARRING:
LI HSIN (源昕) AS AH-GUI (YOUTH),
LI YUN-YUN (李芸筠) AS AH-GUI (CHILD),
LIN MEI-SHIU (林美秀) AS TRAVEL AGENT, MEI FANG (梅芳) AS GRANDMA, LI YUNG-FENG (李永豐) AS AH-GUI'S FATHER, LIN PO-HUNG (林柏宏) AS AH-HSIEN (阿賢)
RUNNING TIME:
96 MINUTES
LANGUAGE:
IN MANDARIN AND HOKLO WITH CHINESE SUBTITLES
RELEASE:
TODAY

FILM REVIEW

Crimes and misbehaviors

Rian Johnson flaunts his knowledge of cinematic forms and genres in con artist caper 'The Brothers Bloom'

BY STEPHEN HOLDEN
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

Rian Johnson's globe-trotting caper comedy *The Brothers Bloom* is the movie equivalent of an elaborate juggling act whose performers keep dozens of pins wheeling in the air. As much as you admire the stagecraft and the technical skills on display, when all is said and done, that's all it is: a fancy, not-quite-two-hour stunt.

What you take away from this snazzy-looking fantasy about fraternal grifters embarking on a final con are its travel brochure-pretty pictures of colorful locales including Prague, St Petersburg and Montenegro. Beyond that your response to the movie, which takes too conspicuous a delight in its own cleverness, is likely to be a shrug and a "so what?" Like those airborne pins, *The Brothers Bloom* never lands.

Johnson is certainly talented. Four years ago his debut feature, *Brick*, a film noir spoof set in a contemporary high school, announced the arrival of a director with a prodigious knowledge of film genres and a visual flair to match. But emotionally there was no there there. Flashier and glossier, *The Brothers Bloom* is a sideways move into a related genre: the more vacuous realm of the *Ocean's Eleven* movies and their ilk. Rather like an Indiana Jones film, *The Brothers Bloom* layers movie styles, from noir to adventure serial to screwball comedy, to conjure a timeless present.

Instead of George Clooney and Brad Pitt, the eternally naughty boys suckering marks in a life of never-ending adventure are played by Mark Ruffalo and Adrien Brody. Ruffalo plays the older brother and the team's conceptual maestro, Stephen, who plots each scam like a novel in which his younger sibling, identified only as Bloom (Brody), is cast as the protagonist.

Stephen also voices the movie's



Adrien Brody, left, and Mark Ruffalo, right, bite off more than they can chew when they try to scam Rachel Weisz, center, in *The Brothers Bloom*.

glibly cynical philosophy that the best con is one in which everybody gets what he wants. In Stephen's diabolically complex plots he is the only player who knows what is real and what is fake, and the guessing games go on until the last second.

As the put-upon assistant and tag-along in these schemes, Brody projects the soulful anxiety of a man who, after 25 years of being a willing collaborator in his brother's scams, longs to live an unscripted life. Their story is introduced with a facetiously flowery narration by Ricky Jay, describing how the brothers were shuttled from foster home to foster home. An early con game, in which they collect US\$2 from their schoolmates, is shown.

After the prologue the movie leaps ahead to the present, when Stephen

prevails upon a reluctant Bloom to join in his ultimate con: the fleecing of Penelope (Rachel Weisz), a wealthy, eccentric New Jersey heiress who lives like a hermit in her castle. Penelope, who suggests an artier descendant of Weisz's character in the first two *Mummy* movies, embraces con artistry with a fearless zest.

Once Weisz appears, *The Brothers Bloom* acquires some effervescence. Penelope's talent for learning new skills is shown in an early montage in which she demonstrates her mastery of a circus's worth of weird hobbies.

As the brothers lure her into a scheme that involves the theft, smuggling and resale of a priceless antiquarian book, Penelope emerges from her shell. Accompanying them on their international jaunt is a mute sidekick, Bang Bang (Rinko Kikuchi, from *Babel*),

Film Notes
THE BROTHERS BLOOM
DIRECTED BY:
RIAN JOHNSON
STARRING:
RACHEL WEISZ (PENELOPE), ADRIEN BRODY (BLOOM), MARK RUFFALO (STEPHEN), RINKO KIKUCHI (BANG BANG), MAXIMILIAN SCHELL (DIAMOND DOG), ROBBIE COLTRANE (THE CURATOR), RICKY JAY (NARRATOR)
RUNNING TIME:
113 MINUTES
TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

who is an expert in explosives.

Not long after meeting Penelope, Bloom falls in love with her, but the affair has little traction. It all builds up to an anticlimactic "is it real or is it fake?" finale in which Stephen may have met his match in treachery.

Extraneous characters who pop in and out, unnecessarily complicating matters, are Diamond Dog (Maximilian Schell), the brothers' double-dealing mentor in con artistry, and the Curator (Robbie Coltrane), a smuggler of Belgian antiques.

With *The Brothers Bloom* Johnson joins the company of younger directors like Wes Anderson who equate smart, serious filmmaking with manipulating genres and copping attitudes. The flourishing of all that talent is exciting as far as it goes. But it is only a first step in turning movies into art.

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

The Final Destination

Part 4 of this fading series of gory match-ups between Death and heavily disadvantaged Spunky Young Things brings back Part 2 director David R. Ellis. The veteran stuntman delivered a fantastic freeway disaster premonition in the earlier film's opening scene, but it's hard to see how he can top it here, especially given that the carnage takes place at a (sigh) NASCAR meet. Car racing? If the producers had explored the determinism of Death's design with a little more wit, they might have focused on Death hunting down stock brokers and bankers who survived last year's crash. Screening in 3D in select theaters.



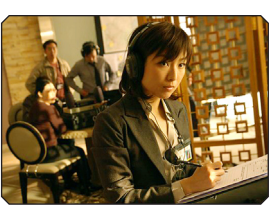
Che: Part One and Che: Part Two

This four-hour Steven Soderbergh biography of the Latin American revolutionary is being screened in two parts under the titles *The Argentine* and *Che* (also titled *Guerrilla*), so you'll have to fork out twice to see Che Guevara preside over the Cuban Revolution before finding oblivion in Bolivia. Many critics didn't know what to make of this idiosyncratic production, while others took turns attacking and praising it. But for those who know little about modern Latin American history, this could be a splendid introduction. Stars Benicio Del Toro as Che.



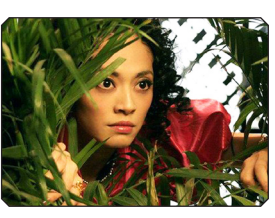
Lady Cop & Papa Crook (大搜查之女)

This Hong Kong/Chinese crime drama was made before another Alan Mak (麥兆輝)/Felix Chong (莊文強) feature, *Overheard*, which was released here last week. The *Infernal Affairs* (無間道) buddies like mixing right and wrong, and in this case the police work with crooks to solve the kidnapping of the young child of a triad heavy. The filmmakers had to make compromises of their own: *Variety* reports that the Chinese government ordered sanitizing material be added (scenes were also deleted, no doubt) to secure a much-delayed release.



Sophie's Revenge (非常完美:奪愛大作戰)

The dynamic Zhang Ziyi (章子怡) is the main draw for this stylish, crowd-pleasing, slightly surreal comedy set in a very spruced-up Beijing. Zhang is Sophie, a cartoonist whose good-looking Korean beau (So Ji-sub) falls for a movie star (Fan Bingbing, 范冰冰). The walls come crashing down, almost literally thanks to computer animation, as Zhang seeks a way to get back on her feet and get her man back. Enter Taiwanese Peter Ho (何潤東), who agrees to help Sophie in her quest but is not without his own baggage — including a growing desire for Sophie herself (subtext alert!).



April Bride

In Japan, if you make a movie about a gorgeous bride with terminal breast cancer and cast the hottest young actors, you can make a lot of money. Whether or not it will encourage female viewers to have their breasts checked regularly is another matter. Nana Eikura is the unfortunate woman, whose diagnosis and a mastectomy send her fleeing from her perfect boyfriend (played by Eita), who manages to track her down in time to propose. Based on a true story.



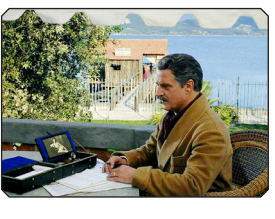
Franklyn

Eva Green, so memorable opposite Daniel Craig in *Casino Royale*, is in a cast of seeming thousands in this dark fantasy of a future gone wrong and the present that leads there. It's set in London and a sinister somewhere in the future called Meanwhile City that may or not be the same place. Splendid visuals are offset by likely confusion and dislocation for many viewers. But the cast is handsome, including the wonderful Art Malik.



Puccini and the Girl

What is it about composers and their romantic misadventures that gets filmmakers going? Ken Russell remains the king of composer biopics, but this unusual effort from Italy has a similar spirit, with dialogue heavily trimmed in a stylized yarn about the death of a maid at the Puccini home. Like *Franklyn*, style reigns over substance, but for most music buffs there's substance enough in the sound track.



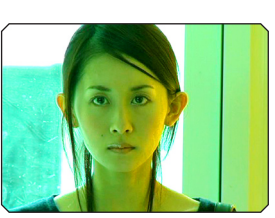
2009 Escentis Film Festival

The cosmetics firm Escentis is behind this two-day festival that hopes to raise money for victims of Typhoon Morakot. There are six films, each screened twice: *The Mistress of Spices* (2005) from the US, the Greek-Turkish co-production *A Touch of Spice* (2003), the award-winning Taiwanese documentary *Chronicle of the Sea: Nan-Fang-Ao* (南方澳海洋紀事) from 2004, and two more recent releases: *The Grocer's Son* from France and the excellent *Lemon Tree* from Israel. The highlight for many, though, would be the 170-minute director's cut of *Cinema Paradiso*. Get in quick: The festival starts today and finishes tomorrow night.



Love Twisted

Late last year we previewed *Man, Woman and the Wall* (2006), a Japanese erotic thriller steeped in voyeurism. *Love Twisted* was made in Japan two years earlier, but shares the theme, as well as crossover porn star Sora Aoi in one of her first non-porn roles. Imagine *Fatal Attraction* with more nudity and set in a really depressing housing complex. Starts tomorrow.



Into the Faraway Sky

Taiwanese actor Chang Chen (張震) has a supporting role in this 2007 film set in Hokkaido about offbeat villagers standing in the way of an airport project and the government man sent to fix the problem. The Taiwanese distributor, ahead of a DVD rollout, has changed the Chinese title to link it to the otherwise unconnected Taiwanese production *Orz Boyz!* (囧男孩). Starts tomorrow.

