

FILM REVIEW

Drowning by numbers

With its sports theme and a physically challenged character in a pivotal role, this melodrama seems ready to capitalize on the Taipei Deaflympics and the Kaohsiung World Games. But it deserves no medal — if anything, the script should have been disqualified

BY MARTIN WILLIAMS
STAFF REPORTER

Taciturn senior high school student Mingfong and his father, Hao-hsiang, live beside a busy railway line in Kaohsiung. Mingfong's mother died a while ago, and the two eke out a humble living. The father is a low-rent removalist, but he gains solace from the fact that Mingfong is a good swimmer, and may have the ability to channel his own frustrated swimming ambitions by taking gold in the pool. To do so, Mingfong must beat 2 minutes and 20 seconds.

After a sympathetic opening scene, Hao-hsiang turns out to be quite oppressive, and the film quickly turns tedious, indicating that it has no clue what its market is. An inspirational saga about competitive swimming would have much more dynamic sports footage and a detailed rivalry between the hero and his nemesis (here, a swimming ace called the Frog King, who barely appears). A satisfying drama would have concentrated on character development and light and shade, not neurotic and repetitive lectures on winning medals. And a family film about the redemptive powers of a handicapped child (more on him in a moment) would have had a lot less weeping, screaming and cursing.

Deeply conservative, the screenplay jumps straight into manipulating Mingfong's sense of guilt at his inertia, and then at the fate of both parents, while juxtaposing the "bad girls" that would tempt Mingfong from his path to sporting glory (they're "bad" because they wear skimpy clothing and dance suggestively) against chaste "good girl" swimmer Hsiao-ping, who likes him. But the good girl turns out to be off to the US with her parents after finishing high school,



Hsueh Yu-ting, above left, and Lin Li-yang, above right, star in 02'20''.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DEEJOY PICTURE CORPORATION

anyway, so what good is she?

Like Mingfong's father and his coach — a sympathetic character, but not without oppressive moments of his own — Hsiao-ping cannot understand why Mingfong is so sullen and unresponsive, and in a particularly grating sequence, this would-be girlfriend berates him for not being more open about his feelings. Poor Mingfong: The girl of his watery dreams is a tease waiting to join the ballbreaker queue.

Her pending departure doesn't stop poor Mingfong from falling in like with her, yet even the childish expression of his desire at the climactic swim meet is so ineptly directed that it isn't clear whether a roar of approval from the crowd is directed at

the couple or at the next heat's competitors.

The film's pivotal moment appears out of nowhere. A child without lower legs (Chen Liang-da, 陳亮達) dives into a pool and races up and down without a care in the world. This is a real person playing himself, and he's the most interesting thing in the movie; certainly, he belongs in a different movie.

Upon seeing this child, Mingfong wakes from his teen angst stupor and is inspired to be the best he can be. A Rocky-style training montage, botched by oblivious direction and editing, puts Mingfong back on the road to success, which not even a jealous bully and a nasty leg wound can derail. But the glory is anticlimactic: The all-important

race comes across as a heat — until the race is won. Whoops, that was the final?

More's the pity. Hsueh Yu-ting (薛宇庭), as Mingfong, has appeal, but his portrayal is trapped between sulking and unappealing outbursts. Lacking wit, warmth and smarts, he is never given a chance to win over the audience. Other actors try hard enough, but it's hard to escape the feeling that they knew this film — heavily supported by local government — is as low-rent as Mingfong's father.

The highly regarded Gerald Shih (史攏詠) wrote the film's score. In 02'20'', however, the music is lamentable. Seemingly aware that director Hsueh Shao-hsuan (薛少軒) cannot sustain mood or interest in



Film Notes

02'20'' (2分20秒)

DIRECTED BY:
HSUEH SHAO-HSUAN (薛少軒)

STARRING:
HSUEH YU-TING (薛宇庭) AS
MINGFONG, LIN LI-YANG (林立洋) AS
HAO-HSIANG, HUANG CHUNG-KUN
(黃仲昆) AS COACH, CHEN LIANG-DA
(陳亮達) AS DA-DA

RUNNING TIME:
90 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

the characters, the soundtrack punctuates scene after scene with overpowering filler. When the director "guaranteed" at a press conference that the audience would cry, presumably he wasn't referring to his composer's hits to the solar plexus.

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

Murderer (殺人犯)

A Hong Kong cop (Aaron Kwok, 郭富城) finds himself injured and suffering amnesia at the scene of a brutal crime involving a drill and an involuntary high dive. The more he investigates the murderer's rampage, the more the clues snap at his heels and possibly finger him as an unwitting serial killer. Is this a Cantonese *Angel Heart*? It's certainly got the production values: Key members of Ang Lee's (李安) crew for *Lust, Caution* feature prominently. Problem is, reviews from Hong Kong and first notices from the US wait about the twist near the end of this violent thriller. It's so ludicrous, they say, that audiences may never forget it or forgive those responsible. But that's got to be better than a bad film you struggle to remember only a week after seeing it (take a bow, 02'20'').



Carriers

Variety wondered if this shelved US virus contamination pic finally found a small release stateside this month because of the presence of Chris Pine (*Star Trek*) in the cast. Maybe swine flu also had a role to play? Either way, this modest end-of-the-world drama set in rural America should intrigue fans of the genre, though it doesn't break new ground the way *28 Days Later* and its sequel did. More cerebral than horrific, and as with *28 Weeks Later*, there's a Spanish connection: Co-director brothers Alex and David Pastor hail from there.



The Rebound

Like *Carriers*, this Catherine Zeta-Jones romcom, made last year, has been struggling to secure theater bookings in English-language markets — it doesn't open in the UK and Australia until next year, for example. Zeta-Jones is a lonely single mother in the Big Apple who gets it on with a rather young man (Justin Bartha, from *The Hangover*). C'mon ... like age difference is a credible plot hook if *Catherine Zeta-Jones* is the prize? Speaking of casting oddities, Art Garfunkel makes his first big screen appearance in more than a decade.



Ladies Film Festival

Not to be confused with this year's Women Make Waves Film Festival, which starts next month, this mini-fest at selected Taipei theaters offers three features with "ladies" as the theme. *Agathe Clery* is a droll French sort-of musical starring Valerie Lemercier as a bigoted cosmetics executive who turns black and has her comfy white world turned upside down. Romantic comedy *I Hate Valentine's Day* has Nia Vardalos, star of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, find that her bizarre philosophy of dating eventually doesn't pass muster. In the more sober *The Headless Woman*, a female dentist in Argentina flees from a car accident that will come back to haunt her.



FILM REVIEW

Lessons learned from history

Just in time for the LGBT Parade that takes place on Oct. 31, a mini film festival on documentary maker Rob Epstein traces the past struggles of gay communities

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

In 1978, Harvey Milk, gay activist and San Francisco city supervisor, was shot to death along with mayor George Moscone by fellow supervisor Dan White. Thirty years later, Gus van Sant's much-anticipated *Milk* told the story of the late politician, considered by many to be the modern gay movement's first martyr. The movie garnered widespread critical acclaim, with Sean Penn winning his second Oscar for playing the role of Milk.

But fewer people are familiar with accomplished documentary maker Rob Epstein's 1984 film *The Times of Harvey Milk*, an Oscar-winning documentary that served as the blueprint for Van Sant's feature.

The two-week long mini retrospective on Epstein currently showing at SPOT — Taipei Film House presents four award-winning documentary works by the American director, an artist known for raising mainstream awareness about gay-related issues through his polished, non-fictional films.

Epstein takes the audience on a journey through Milk's life, a chronicle suffused with poignant emotion. A project that began before Milk was murdered, *The Times of Harvey Milk*, composed of exclusive documentary and archival footage, combines original interviews with news reports to create a gripping work that extends its gaze far beyond the specifics of Milk's life. Set in the volatile political and social climate of 1970s San Francisco, the film depicts Milk as an everyday man who chose to speak

out on behalf of both his own community and other minorities. Epstein juxtaposes Milk's rise and demise with the career of White, a man supposedly representative of the "old-fashioned values that built this country."

Much of the film's emotional urgency stems from the testimonies of Milk's friends and associates. Particularly resonant interviews center on the exaltation Milk and his allies experienced after their successful campaign to bar Proposition 6, the proposed California ordinance prohibiting homosexuals from teaching in public schools. The immense impact that Milk's subsequent death had on the gay community is reflected in both images of the candlelight procession on the night of the murders and the severity of the riots that followed White's lenient sentence (White was paroled after serving less than six years for his conviction of voluntary manslaughter).

Recounted with equally strong emotion and blessed with similarly distinctive characters, the Oscar-winning *Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt* (1989) documents the first decade of the American HIV epidemic through the eyes of five individuals featured on the AIDS Memorial Quilt. Narrated by Dustin Hoffmann, the film appeals to more mainstream audiences, bolstered by its high production value and smooth narrative flow.

The stories that the film follows are immensely compelling. As the five interviewees speak of their experiences watching their loved ones die of AIDS, these oral histories are punctuated by news reports criticizing governmental inertia, as well as

accounts of the public fear and hysteria that surrounded the disease. The footage is well edited and progresses towards a tear-inducing climax. In addition to its sentimental impact, the film holds historical value, as first-person witness accounts provide future generations with vital lessons from the not-so-distant past.

Epstein and filmmaker Jeffrey Friedman shift their focus to a lesser-known atrocity in the movie *Paragraph 175* (2000), the title of which refers to a statute that once prohibited homosexuality in Third Reich Germany. Narrated by actor Rupert Everett, the film draws upon the testimonies of six survivors of the Nazi persecution of homosexuals, a purge that resulted in both the condemnation of approximately 10,000 to 15,000 to concentration camps and the arrest of 100,000.

The reluctance of the elderly interviewees to speak is as telling as their words. In an emotional outburst, one survivor recounts a Nazi experiment so horrific that it still makes him bleed every day. Another recalls "the singing forest," a name that alludes to the locale where gay men subjected to torture wailed and screamed. No less disturbing is German historian Klaus Muller's comment that, despite growing up in Germany, he never heard about the mass persecution of gays.

The most entertaining and enjoyable of the four films, *The Celluloid Closet* (1995) delivers a comprehensive review of the ways in which gays and lesbians have been represented in Hollywood cinema. The work ingeniously juxtaposes clips from various movies to construct a persuasive



▲ Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF FLASH FORWARD ENTERTAINMENT

argument about the evolution of homosexual imagery through the cinematic medium, as films ranging from 1912's *Algie*, the *Miner* to 1993's *Philadelphia* are re-examined. In elegantly tracing the progression of the homosexual onscreen image, *The Celluloid Closet* follows the development of the gay archetype from the effeminate laughable sissy to the evil villain or vamp to the pitiful wretch to, finally, real-life characters.

The well-executed film is fun to watch, adorned with witty opinions from gay and straight celebrities alike, including Tom Hanks, Whoopi Goldberg, Susan Sarandon, Tony Curtis and Harvey Fierstein. One highlight is writer Gore Vidal's hilarious account of his introduction of the gay character Masala in the 1959 epic movie *Ben Hur*.



▲ The Times of Harvey Milk.



▲ Paragraph 175.



▲ Celluloid Closet.

FESTIVAL NOTES:

WHAT: Be With You: Four Classic Documentaries by Rob Epstein (與你同在·勞勃·伊普斯汀經典同志紀錄片影展)

WHEN: Today to Oct. 2

WHERE: SPOT — Taipei Film House (光點—台北之家), 18, Zhongshan N Road Sec 2, Taipei City (台北市中山北路二段18號)

ADMISSION: NT\$170 for SPOT members, NT\$220 for non-members, available through NTCH ticketing or online at www.artsticket.com.tw