

FILM REVIEW



Anna Wintour takes center stage in R.J. Cutler's documentary *The September Issue*.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SWALLOW WINGS ENTERTAINMENT



Strike a pose

'The September Issue' provides a brief but fascinating behind-the-scenes look at 'Vogue' magazine and the world of haute couture

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

The *September Issue*, a documentary that takes the camera into the boardrooms, backrooms and catwalks of high fashion lifts the delightful veil that was *The Devil Wears Prada* to take an all-too-brief look at the reality that lies behind the publishing empire that is *Vogue* magazine.

The film puts Anna Wintour, the editor-in-chief of *Vogue* and a woman who is regularly referred to as the most powerful person in the fashion industry, front and center. The period it covers is the run up to the launch of the 2007 September issue of *Vogue*, which was to be the thickest yet, and possibly, at just under 900 pages, the heaviest magazine ever published.

The improbable characters who take part in this endeavor put fiction to shame. One of the most lively is Andre Leon Talley, *Vogue's* editor-at-large, a massive man whose collection of furs, caftans and complete Louis Vuitton tennis outfit with accessories, as well as his grand pronouncements about beauty, produce comedy of the first order. There is Wintour herself, on whom Meryl Streep's character in *The Devil Wears Prada* is based. And at the other end is the soft-spoken young designer Thakoon Panichful,

who is making his way up the fashion ladder and who is casually given a lift by Wintour, something she achieves with a few words of understated recommendation to other movers and shakers of the fashion world.

Although Wintour is the focus of the film, she does not say much to the camera and remains elusive throughout. Her comments about fashion and what it represents are interesting, but it is what other people say about her that is memorable.

An aide to Wintour, talking to the camera, tells us that Wintour "is just not very accessible to people she doesn't need to be accessible to." Junior editors look mortified and bewildered when their work is dismissed with a couple of words, unable to get a word in before Wintour has turned her attention to something else. To balance this out, one of Wintour's daughters makes a brief appearance to suggest that she for one doesn't understand what all the fuss is about fashion. The young lady would rather study law, to the visible disappointment of her mother.

One of the most expressive characters in the documentary is Grace Coddington, a former model and now a senior design

editor who is one of the very few people in the film unafraid to stand her ground against Wintour. The emotional heart of the documentary is the relationship between the two women, which largely plays out as each woman, separately, views the layouts as the magazine takes shape.

Highly articulate and frank, Coddington in many ways is constantly in danger of taking over as the center of attention, but Cutler never lets us forget Wintour's presence, an immovable object against which everyone else, even Coddington, is pushing against.

The beauty of *The September Issue* is not that it lays bare the secrets behind the fashionable facade of the fashion industry. Cutler is good-natured about the absurdity of fashion, prepared to laugh at it, but also willing to accept this multi-billion US dollar industry as a big part of our world. Although he never really cracks Wintour's sphinx-like inscrutability, he has produced a film that had fashion journalists chortling out loud during a press screening and also provided fascinating glimpses behind the scenes for those without the slightest interest in clothes, much less that exotic niche that is

haute couture. It does this by telling us a little more about the fashion world than we could glean from *The Devil Wears Prada*, and suggests that it is both a much more human and at the same time a much weirder place than we imagined.

Film Notes

THE SEPTEMBER ISSUE

DIRECTED BY:
R.J. CUTLER

STARRING:
ANNA WINTOUR AND
THE STAFF OF 'VOGUE'

RUNNING TIME:
90 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

FILM REVIEW

The drummer and the good Samaritan

A widowed professor finds new meaning in life when he crosses paths with a Syrian immigrant in New York

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Cross-cultural connections are a favorite of the movie business, but few get beyond more or less cynical toying with cultural stereotypes. *The Visitor*, which is about the unlikely friendship between a bitter college professor and a young Syrian musician, touches on issues such as immigration, post-9/11 ethnic paranoia, the need to connect not only with oneself but with others, and the liberating effects of ethnic music. It seems all set up to be just an updated version of Peter Weir's cliché-ridden *Green Card* (1990). A combination of Thomas McCarthy's tight script and excellent performances from the small cast ensure that it is nothing of the sort.

Walter Vale is a professor at a college in Connecticut who has lost his pianist wife and all interest in his work and his students. He reluctantly returns to New York to deliver a paper at a conference to find his apartment inhabited by Tarek (Haaz Sleiman), a Syrian drummer and his girlfriend Zainab (Danai Jekesai Gurira), who sells handcrafted ornaments in a street market. McCarthy, who also wrote the script, handles the meeting of two cultures with enormous sensitivity, and also with a light touch, getting behind the surface of things. Vale's courtesy to "the visitor" is largely the result of the emptiness of his own life and the self-sufficient lives of his middle-class neighbors. Zainab only slowly comes to accept Vale's offers of assistance as anything more than a cruel deception, the product of America's myth of its own universal benevolence.

McCarthy shows a brilliant aptitude of escaping the pitfalls in a format in which



the temptations of cliché are so evident. While it is not much of a surprise that the free-spirited Tarek starts giving Vale drum lessons and helps him discover his long-smothered rhythm, McCarthy does not dwell on this and moves the story on quickly. Tarek gets picked up because of a minor misunderstanding in the subway and is soon in detention, awaiting deportation.

Drawn into Tarek's troubles, Vale is brought face to face with an aspect of his world that is the dark side of the local color and the exciting sounds of a multicultural city.

A scene in which Vale is brought up hard against bureaucratic inertia that has always been his friend is perfectly gauged, and shows Richard Jenkins (best known perhaps

from *Six Feet Under*) for the fine actor that he is. He is restrained from getting himself arrested by Tarek's mother (Hiam Abbass), no stranger to being on the side of the government. "It is just like Syria," she says, and there McCarthy is content to leave it.

Abbass gives a brilliant performance as Mouna Khalil, Tarek's mother, and the establishment of a tender relationship with Vale carries the film to its conclusion. Whether this connection can be preserved, or whether a mix of fear, convenience and prejudice will bring it all tumbling down is left hanging in the air as the credits role. The questions that the film asks linger on like the reverberation of Tarek's drums long after you leave the cinema.



Above: Richard Jenkins, right, and Hiam Abbass star in *The Visitor*, directed by Thomas McCarthy.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ZEUS INTERNATIONAL PRODUCTION

Film Notes

THE VISITOR

DIRECTED BY:
THOMAS MCCARTHY

STARRING:
RICHARD JENKINS (PROFESSOR
WALTER VALE), HAAZ SLEIMAN
(TAREK KHALIL), DANAI JEKESAI
GURIRA (ZAINAB), HIAM ABBASS
(MOUNA KHALIL)

RUNNING TIME:
104 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

Burma VJ

The 10 Conditions of Love is getting all the press, but those looking for a first-class political documentary have another option — and it's coming to a university campus

near you. *Burma VJ* is an award-winning film by Anders Ostergaard that depicts and recreates the activities of underground Burmese journalists who risked their lives to get video footage of the 2007 protests out of the country. Details on this highly regarded film are at burmavjmovie.com, while playdates and locations are listed in Chinese at tasskn.blogspot.com.



Surrogates

Bruce Willis isn't getting any younger, but unlike other big action stars over the years, he has managed to stay very credible. In

Surrogates, Willis is a law enforcer in a world where idealized android copies interact on behalf of their homebound human versions. When a rare murder occurs, Willis goes off the grid to investigate — using his real self. Jonathan Mostow, who ably directed another aging action star in the third *Terminator* installment, is at the reins of this movie metaphor for the overuse of technology. With a bit of luck he won't deliver a generic futuristic flick like *The Sixth Day*, which this film resembles in places, but the lack of press previews does not fill one with confidence.



Sorority Row

Speaking of new installments of aging material, this is yet another remake of a horror flick from the late 1970s-early 1980s. Like the original *The House on Sorority Row*, a bunch of

young ladies kill one of their sorority sisters when a ... wait for it ... prank goes wrong, and some time later, oddly enough, a psycho returns with a trusty tire iron for some gory payback. The vengeful return of the mistreated was done to death in *My Bloody Valentine* and its remake, *The Burning, I Know What You Did Last Summer* and a host of others. The main difference to be noted in this film, therefore, is not the updated script (date rape drugs, fashionable technology) but the changing ethnic makeup of the girls on sorority row (there's one Asian: Jamie Chung from *Dragonball: Evolution*).



Amalfi

The title refers to the famed region of Italy, which is where this family-friendly Japanese thriller was shot. An efficient embassy official investigates when a Japanese kid is kidnapped, putting in

train a series of adventures that might impress stay-at-home folks in Japan (and Taiwan), but not those seeking high-octane confrontations and bloodshed. The *Japan Times* said the film is "pretty to look at, mildly entertaining and reaffirms the essential niceness of Japanese folks."



Ichi

In feudal Japan, a blind musician with lethal sword skills (Haruka Ayase from *Oppai Volleyball* and *Happy Flight*) sets out to find her blind masseuse

father, encountering the usual bandits and deadly political intrigue. This is an update of the famed series centering on the blind Zatoichi character, who could be this forlorn young woman's father. Critics admired the film's visuals and noted its retention of genre conventions rather than a modern reworking of theme and character, notwithstanding the female lead.



Naoko

Another manga-based film from Japan, this one turns to the curious sport of relay marathons and the relationships among the members of one team. Naoko (Juri Ueno) is a manager for the team, but her ability to deal with the best of its runners is compromised by memories of a fatal accident some years before. Of more interest than the manga-based, baseball-themed *Rookies: Graduation*, which opened last month, if only because marathons have better scenery.



The Little Finger and the Forbidden Body

A mannered Japanese incest potboiler from 2005, this is being promoted as an earlier feature starring Hiroyuki Ikeuchi (*Ip Man*). Ikeuchi gets it on — and on — with his sister, only to later block the memory of the experience. But his line of work in a red light district doesn't let his repressed past stay buried. Actor-director Kei Horie seems to have a thing for grim subject matter. Also known in English as *Finger and Body* and *The Whole Body and the Little Finger* — the mind boggles. The Baixue theater in Ximending is the best possible place for a movie like this.

