

FILM REVIEW

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS



Woodstock, you had to be there

Since *Ice Storm* in 1995, Taiwan-born director Ang Lee (李安) has made a number of forays in Americana. *Taking Woodstock*, a comedy about the massive concert-cum-happening that defined a generation, has, of all these films, with the possible exception of the Marvel Comics adaptation *Hulk* (2003), the broadest appeal. It is also likely to disappoint on a number of fronts, particularly its dearth of generation-defining music.

Lee takes as his starting point the character of Elliot Tiber (Demetri Martin), a small-town boy who for better or worse believes that it is his duty to help out his curmudgeonly parents who own a motel in the Catskills. Tiber is a real person, and his book, *Taking Woodstock: A True Story of a Riot, a Concert and a Life*, was the inspiration for this film, and as portrayed by Marin, is, despite all his good qualities, something of a charisma vacuum. It is a mark of Lee's genius that he is able to use this negative energy to magnificent effect. In *Taking Woodstock*, Tiber is the eye of the storm around which the tumult happens. He drops acid and has casual sex, but he remains an outsider, brushed by great events, but getting on with his own rather insignificant life despite it all.

Taking Woodstock could all too easily have become yet another earnest exploration of a small niche of American life, and the slow opening, setting up Tiber's dysfunctional relationship with his parents and his own uncertainty about his future, suggested as much. A 1960s version of *The Ice Storm* loomed, but then a

Ang Lee changes tack and pace in '*Taking Woodstock*,' a tale of capitalism and flower power

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

desperate idea to avert financial ruin brings Michael Lang (Jonathan Groff) and his crew of musical impresarios into town, and spectacular chaos ensues.

Many of the ideas that were generated by 1960s counterculture are still very much with us, and while many were directly touched by its magic, many, many more absorbed its effects indirectly, second or third hand. It is to this vast multitude, rather than the linear descendants of the flower children, the fans of Dylan and Hendrix, to whom Lee speaks, which may go some way to explaining the rather muted part music plays in the film. Tiber is the catalyst that brings the Woodstock festival to Max Yasgur's (Eugene Levy) farm near the town of Bethel, New York. Apart from the vast hippie crowd, there were the music impresarios of Woodstock Ventures, who were also out to make money from the event. In a number of sequences, Lee plays off the laid-back, go-with-the-flow mythology of Woodstock against the hardheaded capitalism that got the ball rolling in the first place.

Lee brings a very light touch to *Taking Woodstock*, happy to allow comedy to dominate, but managing to let the darker currents of that era occasionally peep

through the surface.

It's been 14 years since *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), and one had all but forgotten how skilled Lee can be at handling lightly comic situations. In *Taking Woodstock*, Lee pokes fun at Tiber, the flower children and the conservatism of Middle America, but does so without rancor, and more importantly, without (much) caricature.

The casting of Henry Goodman and Imelda Staunton, two English actors, as Tiber's parents is rather peculiar, and though Goodman slips into his role with relative ease, Staunton, fine actor though she is, works far too hard, and sometimes verges on becoming a character from *Benny Hill*. The cast is enlivened by the appearance of Liev Schreiber as Vilma, a cross-dressing ex-Marine who provides security at Tiber's motel when the crowds start pouring in, and by Mamie Gummer as Tisha, an assistant to the Woodstock Ventures capitalists, who sees things as they really are through her spaced-out thousand-mile stare.

Taking Woodstock is not about a concert, or indeed is it particularly about social change or the emergence of a new era. Its social commentary is lightweight, though deftly handled, but it is solidly

Children, and grown-ups, of the revolution.

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about what Ang Lee has always made films about: relationships and self-awareness. Tiber's character, alas, doesn't grow a whole lot, which means the film peters out somewhat, rather like the anticlimax that follows after too much partying.

The film ends with Lang hinting that he would be helping organize another concert, this time at Altamont. Peace and love are all very well, but Lee is well aware that there is another side to that coin.

Film Notes

TAKING WOODSTOCK

DIRECTED BY:
ANG LEE

STARRING:
DEMETRI MARTIN (ELLIOT TIBER), HENRY GOODMAN (JAKE TEICHBERG), IMELDA STAUNTON (SONIA TEICHBERG), EMILE HIRSCH (BILLY), EUGENE LEVY (MAX YASGUR), MAMIE GUMMER (TISHA), JONATHAN GROFF (MICHAEL LANG); LIEV SCHREIBER (VILMA)

RUNNING TIME:
110 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

FILM REVIEW

What goes around, comes around

Director Nati Baratz follows a Tibetan Buddhist monk on his four-year search for the reincarnation of his mentor

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

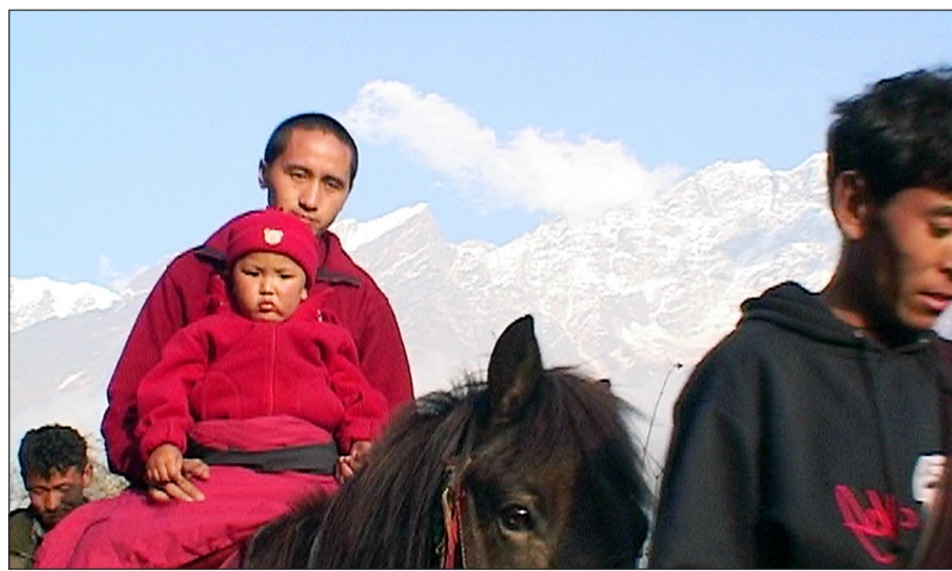
Reincarnation is a fashionable concept, and some of us might even be prepared to say we believe in it. But would we spend years of our life searching for the reincarnated soul of someone we loved and revered? Tenzin Zopa has little doubt that his mentor, the Tibetan Buddhist master Geshe Lama Konchog, would certainly return to continue the task of bringing enlightenment to the mundane world, and this documentary by Israeli director Nati Baratz follows him on his four-year search for his reincarnated mentor, the "unmistaken child" of the title.

Tenzin Zopa, a gentle and soft-spoken monk, makes an appealing guide into a world that is quite as bizarre as anything that could be dreamt up in the wildest fantasy novel.

His determination to find the soul of his master reincarnated in a recently born child receives the blessing of his superiors, and various methods, including a consultation with a fortune-teller in Taiwan, are used to determine the child's location.

The four-year search takes Tenzin Zopa through some of the most rugged terrain in the world, trials he endures without complaint. He is looking for a precocious child, and many of the dull-eyed village children he inspects in his travels all too clearly do not have a great soul residing within. The search itself is only part of the film, another aspect of the story being Tenzin Zopa's spiritual journey to deal with the loss of a mentor he served unquestioningly for more than two decades.

During his travels, he presents children with various items his master possessed,



seeking recognition in their eyes. What is most remarkable is that he finds a child, one who may or may not consciously be playing up to the man's expectations. Whatever the explanation for the child's responses, Tenzin Zopa is convinced he has found his master again.

The child is tested by a committee of senior monks, picking out items that belonged to the lama from a collection laid out before him. How much the child is guided by the wishes of the monks around him is left an open question. What is undeniable is the fact that his acceptance by the monks means that he is all but kidnapped into a monastic life, his parents tearfully accepting that a life dedicated to bringing souls to enlightenment outweighs the their own puny claims to their son.

In *Unmistaken Child*, magic has two sides. While it brings a renewed sense of purpose to Tenzin Zopa, who must instruct the child in preparation for presentation to the Dalai Lama, and who acts in all ways as a servant to a new master, one cannot but question any belief that allows a child to be taken away from his family in such a cavalier fashion, whatever joy and sense of fulfillment it might bring to Tenzin Zopa himself. This is as much a story about a search as about a man's attempts to deal with loss, a loss so traumatic that it could be interpreted as the disintegration of his world.

Tenzin Zopa's own particular brand of naivete allows the story to be told with great frankness, a mixture of deep emotion and, for most of the audience, staggeringly absurd superstition. This is the great achievement

of *Unmistaken Child*. It is delightful to watch Tenzin Zopa playing with his new mentor; achingly funny as the child, dressed in the ceremonial robes of a lama, plays dejectedly with plastic trucks and other toys he has been given to celebrate his elevation; and gut-wrenching to watch the parents acquiesce to the removal of their son.

The film does not ask any hard moral questions about the rightness of such actions in the modern world, content just to watch as events unfold. What it does is take the audience on a journey through a magical world in which the souls of the great and good really do come back to bless us — and then leaves us to form our own conclusions.

The ties that bind. PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOINT ENTERTAINMENT INTERNATIONAL

Film Notes

UNMISTAKEN CHILD

DIRECTED BY:
NATI BARATZ

STARRING:
TENZIN ZOPA AS HIMSELF

RUNNING TIME:
102 MINUTES

LANGUAGE:
IN ENGLISH AND TIBETAN WITH CHINESE AND ENGLISH SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

Scholar cinema closes

It's never good news if a theater closes, even if it doesn't have the best reputation. The Scholar multiplex on Changchun Street in Taipei was one such place, its owner apparently deciding that China offers better business. No one will miss the cramped interiors or sullen staff, but Scholar did show fringe and low-budget product no one else would touch. How else would we have seen *Wolf Creek* and *Five Across the Eyes* in cinemas? A moment's silence ... and on to this week's other titles:

The Lucky Ones

Tim Robbins, Rachel McAdams (*The Time Traveler's Wife*) and Michael Pena (Nicolas Cage's co-survivor in *World Trade Center*) are US soldiers home from Iraq with various personal problems — sexual, financial, familial — who share a car trip across the US. This road movie with a difference scored mixed reviews, but few were left cold by the three leads, who might make this one worthwhile for audiences who are feeling lucky.



Gamer

If you loved the *Crank* films, which were generously off the wall for anyone who could stay the distance, then you might find something to admire in this chaotic movie from the same writer-directors. Gerard Butler (*300*) is a death row prisoner of the future and participant in a video game in which he and his fellows are manipulated by paying players. He's about to win yet another bout and secure his release, perhaps to liberate his child and wife, who is in a vile sexual game environment of her own, but he might know too much about the people who run the show. After all these years, *Tron* still seems to rise above the pack of video-game movies — without cuss words, sex or nasty violence.



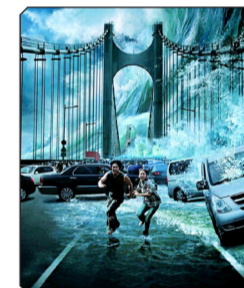
Let the Right One In

An award-winning Swedish horror film with a sense of humor and a willingness to play in the dark (though not as much as the book on which the film is based, according to *Variety*), this is possibly the strongest release of the week. A bullied young boy makes the acquaintance of a strange girl of the same age whose apparent father figure runs strange errands for the pallid-looking creature. Just when you thought vampirism had nowhere left to go ...



Tsunami

The timing is unfortunate, or perhaps fortunate from the distributor's point of view, but this first-ever South Korean disaster epic was scheduled for release before the Samoan tsunami occurred. So audiences can watch this odd mixture of Irwin Allen and Korean character ensemble with a clear-ish conscience. An ensemble of wave fodder — including the obligatory character with a tragic past — take up a good part of the running time before Mother Nature sends one crashing home. From Yun Je-gyun, the formerly lowbrow director of *Sex Is Zero* and *Crazy Assassins*. Korean title: *Haeundae*, which is where the movie is set.



Time Lost, Time Found

As heartrending plots go, this one rends with the best of them. A Japanese first-time mother-to-be in her late 30s is diagnosed with cancer and must make the impossible choice of starting treatment and losing her baby or keeping the child and likely condemning herself to the grave. Expect bawling audiences with this one (i.e., the same people that went to see terminal illness weepie *April Bride* last month), but if you don't want to know the ending, for goodness' sake don't look at the poster. Features a song called *Get a Life ~Again~*. If only Takashi Miike had been the director ...



Tear This Heart Out

Sprawling yarn covers a subject little touched on by Hollywood: lust and political intrigue in early-to-mid-20th-century Mexico. A teenager beds and weds an ambitious general in some detail (hence the restricted rating) before the relationship between the two develops into a political asset — and an emotional liability. Largely a love story and a melodramatic study of a woman's travails in Mexico's always stormy history, those interested in slightly more nuanced treatments of gender relations in Mexico might be better off renting *Frida* with Salma Hayek. Spanish title: *Arrancame La Vida*.



Sappho

The first of two DVD promotional releases this week is a curio. A Ukrainian production set in Greece with a British director, American leads and many other nationalities in the cast, its successful release in its home country was accompanied by inexplicably angry protests by local Christians who objected to homosexual scenes between a newly married American woman and a Russian. But this is not a sex film, as such, even if it is showing at the Baixue theater in Ximending. Starts tomorrow.



Necessary Evil

Two of the grimmest-looking and hardest-working actors anywhere, Lance Henriksen (*Aliens*) and Danny Trejo (*Desperado*), star in a demonic tale involving a pregnant woman researcher, her lethal doctor and lots of mumbo jumbo (not to mention shades of *The Exorcist* and *Rosemary's Baby*). This went straight to DVD in the US. Starts tomorrow.

