

# Scrooge goes 3D

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

Director Robert Zemeckis takes digital cinema to a new level with 'A Christmas Carol'

BY DAVE KEHR  
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For more than 100 years, movies have been made in the same basic way: You put actors in front of a camera and photograph them.

Robert Zemeckis wants to change all that. A *Christmas Carol*, which opens today, represents Zemeckis' third excursion into the brave new world of performance capture, a radically transformative technique that he pioneered with *The Polar Express* (2004) and continued to explore with *Beowulf* (2007).

Starring in this latest adaptation of Charles Dickens' frequently filmed 1843 novella is Jim Carrey, who joins a distinguished roster of movie Scrooges that includes Alastair Sim, Albert Finney, George C. Scott, Bill Murray and Mr. Magoo. But while audiences will hear Carrey's voice (he also plays the ghosts of Christmases

past, present and yet to come) and see his distinctive body language, the figure before them will be a computerized amalgam of human and animated elements. And the Victorian London that Scrooge inhabits is not the usual blend of studio sets and matte paintings, but a fully realized 3D environment, built from the ground up in the digital dimension.

The film begins with a stunning demonstration of the effects made possible by this technique: The camera soars through the streets and byways of a vast, densely imagined city, dipping down to eye level to peer into the faces of individual passers-by, then flying up above the rooftops to capture a bird's-eye view of the maze of elaborately executed buildings. The visual design stops just short of photo-realism, creating a world of convincing volume and substance that is still lightly dusted with fantasy.

"Because I can do shots like that — this is why I love the digital cinema so much," said Zemeckis, whose credits include the Oscar-winning *Forrest Gump* (1994) as well as a wide range of films in styles both fantastic (*Back to the Future*, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*) and realistic (*What Lies Beneath*, *Cast Away*).

"The ability to move the

camera anywhere, to take any angle on a scene without worrying about the physical thing getting in the way — how wonderful is that?" Zemeckis said. "I like to say that the beautiful thing about what I'm doing here in this form is that it frees me from the tyranny of technique, and yet I get the wonderful bonus of maintaining the magic of the performance. I get the best of both worlds."

Essentially, what Zemeckis has attempted in his last three movies is the division of the complex process of filmmaking into two discrete stages, each more easily manageable in isolation. Rather than trying to deal with the elusive chemistry of performance on a live set increasingly crowded with technicians and technology, he has found a way of recording the actors first and creating the image that will contain them later.

In practice this means registering the performers not as images on film, but as moving data points in a three-dimensional digital environment. "A couple of technicians flew out to Shepperton Studios and started to take data on my face and body," recalled Colin Firth, who plays Scrooge's nephew Fred in the new film, "which meant standing in my underwear on a platform while something that looked like a laser

*Film Notes*

**A CHRISTMAS CAROL**

DIRECTED BY:  
ROBERT ZEMECKIS

STARRING AND WITH THE VOICES OF:  
JIM CARREY (SCROOGE/HOST/GHOST OF CHRISTMAS YET TO COME), STEVE VALENTINE (FUNERARY UNDERTAKER/TOPPER), DARYL SABARA (PETER CRATCHIT), GARY OLDMAN (BOB CRATCHIT/MARLEY/TINY TIM)

RUNNING TIME:  
96 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:  
TODAY

beam scanned me up and down. I turned around and there was a kind of a gray, clay figure on a screen of me, with all of the shapes and contours. And then they did something similar with my face. They had me do a million different facial expressions while a camera took pictures of me.

"Then a couple of months later I was in Los Angeles having more stuff like this done," Firth

continued. "You go into rooms with lenses on every surface of every wall. They give you a heavy spandex suit covered in dots that are read by some sort of beam that shines across the room you are in. This room is not called the set, but 'the volume.'"

With the performances in the can, Zemeckis and his team move on to what he calls the "cinema" component. "We've got it, it's all there; it's just like a live-action movie except that it's a 3D recording of the virtual essence," Zemeckis said. "The actors get to go home." That "essence" is then digitally folded into the characters, costumes, props and settings that have been created by the production designer, Doug Chiang. Working with the director of photography, Robert Presley, Zemeckis chooses where to place his virtual camera within the scenes and how they are to be lighted. With his editor, Jeremiah O'Driscoll, Zemeckis chooses the length of the shots and the order in which they are to appear.

For Zemeckis, a filmmaker who loves to work with the long takes and elaborate camera movements associated with directors like Max Ophüls and Otto Preminger, this is probably the best part. "If you've been looking at my movies over the years," he said, "you'll see that

I edit less and less and less. And now I don't have to edit at all! This is the logical extension of where I've been going."

Does this control come at the price of spontaneity? "There are directors who love to work in an atmosphere of chaos," Zemeckis said. "They love working with actors who are miserable pains, because it keeps all this chaotic energy going. I personally don't like that. I like a nice, calm, quiet, very controlled set."

"This has always been the most heartbreaking thing to me," he continued, "working in this incredibly technical art form which I love: an actor does something magnificent that just comes out — they're doing their job and suddenly here's this brilliant moment that you never thought of. When that happens to me on the set, the first thing I get is this terrific sense of dread. We'll cut the shot, and the camera operator will say we fuzzed the focus, or we didn't hit our mark with the dolly, or there was a boom shadow on the actor, or there was an extra back there across the street who looked right into the lens. That's always what happens, and you never get that moment back. When I'm working in this form, it's all about performance. It's always being recorded, and you never

have to compromise performance because of the technique."

For Zemeckis, the great drawback to the technique is that serendipity goes out the window. "Everything in cinema is a trade-off," Zemeckis said. "When I made *Forrest Gump*, there just happened to be on the plantation where we were shooting a beautiful oak tree. I went, 'Oh, my God, this is where we have to bury Jenny,'" the character played by Robin Wright Penn.

"But in this form, you have to remember to paint the oak tree," Zemeckis continued. "You have to think of everything. You're not going to have those kinds of happy accidents, so you're basically writing images. You can get the happy accidents with your performances, but the images have to be written specifically. That's the trade-off."

True enough, but such roadblocks are not sufficient to diminish Zemeckis' fascination with the technique he has helped to create. "What I'm doing here is taking 30 years of live-action filmmaking experience and trying my best to apply it to this new digital cinema," he said. "As long as they let me keep doing it, I'm committed. It's just so exhilarating right now to be working in this form."

## OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS



### Meat Grinder

A coming-on-middle-aged street vendor projects her madness and history of abuse onto (mostly) unsuspecting, sleazy men — and cooks up a storm. Surprisingly good reviews greeted this gory Thai drama, which is right up there with Hong Kong's *The Untold Story* (八仙飯店之人肉叉燒包) as a boundary-pushing, gag-inducing Asian incarnation of *Sweeney Todd*; it's also a perfectly timed essay for people who think US beef is the sign of the Devil. Abstruse political subtexts (it's set during student riots in the 1970s) and class and gender commentary ... or blood, guts and torture for their own sake? Take your pick. Taiwan's censors have let this one through without cuts, though it isn't clear if this is the version originally banned in Thailand. Either way, here's the question: Why doesn't Taiwan make movies like this?



### Baby Love

A gay doctor (Lambert Wilson) in France wants to adopt a baby but circumstances conspire against him, starting with the authorities and the hostility of his partner. Solution: Arrange a phony marriage with an illegal immigrant from South America and thus acquire a surrogate child. Touches of *Green Card* and *La Cage aux Folles* abound, but they don't quite balance the mood of apprehension that accompanies the fatherly yearnings of the lead character. French title: *Comme les Autres*.



### Rage

The Spot theater in Taipei is taking a chance in screening this strange film. Viewers expecting any sort of standard plot or setting will find themselves hemmed in as the camera (meant to be a cellphone held by some kid at a fashion show) trains on a series of characters who talk for more than 90 minutes as troubling events take place in the vicinity. Fans of Andy Warhol's films might get nostalgic, and there is a lineup of superb performers (starting with Judi Dench, Steve Buscemi and Jude Law). But director Sally Potter (a million miles away from her excellent *Orlando*) gives new technology more credence than it's due; in one of the less convincing gimmicks of recent years, this film premiered simultaneously on mobile phones. Starts Sunday.



### Love Happens

Aaron Eckhart (*The Dark Knight*) is a motivational speaker and author motivated by his wife's death on the roads. Jennifer Aniston is a florist he meets while hosting a seminar in Seattle. A relationship blooms, even as other people in Eckhart's life remain difficult customers. "As each struggles with the hurt of love and loss, they realize that in order to move forward, they need to let go of the past. And if they can, they'll find that, sometimes, love happens when you least expect it," says the promo. That should tell you all you need to know.



### The Girl in the Park

It's taken more than two years for this drama to be released here; it barely screened theatrically in the US after poor reviews. Sigourney Weaver's daughter goes missing in New York's Central Park; years later, her confrontation with a young thief (Kate Bosworth) — who would have been her daughter's age — sets some very strange behavior, thoughts and relationships in motion. Lots of talent in this one, but for many critics it just didn't add up.



### November Child

Last week the *Taipei Times* reviewer lamented the superficial rendering of Taiwan's White Terror era as a love story in *Prince of Tears* (淚王子). This award-winning German film shows what might have been had there been more commitment to the gravity of the material and human complexity. A young woman and a would-be writer try to locate her mother amid the obstacles posed by Germany's partitioned history. The lead actress (Anna Maria Muehe) also plays her mother in flashbacks.



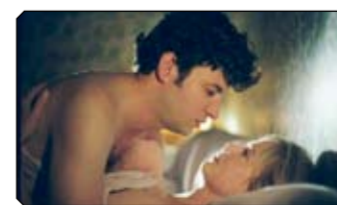
### M.W.

Another week, another manga adaptation from Japan, though this one is a little unusual because the star of the show is a homicidal maniac (Hiroshi Tamaki) with ambitions of mass murder, and the rest of the cast spend most of the time trying to stop being killed — or stop him from killing just about everyone in Japan. The diseased — but no less debonair — product of a gas attack when he was a youngster, Tamaki does not distinguish between the guilty and the innocent among his victims. A fellow survivor-turned-priest is among those on this happy chappie's trail.



### Savage Planet

In the future, when Earth has become almost uninhabitable, a greedy company seeks to make a handsome profit by taking control of an alternative planet to which some of the population can be moved, but its advance team comes under attack from dangerous creatures that resemble large bears. Actually ... they *are* large bears. The only notable thing about this no-budget, made-for-cable fodder from 2006 is that it's directed by Paul Lynch, a veteran TV director who made the original *Prom Night* with Jamie Lee Curtis and Leslie Nielsen way back in 1980. Starts tomorrow at the Baixue theater in Ximending; yes, it's another DVD promotion.



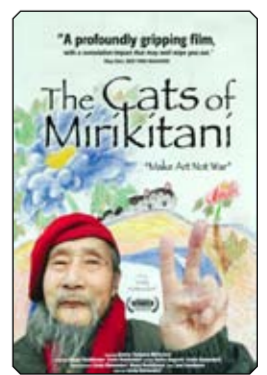
### A French Gigolo

Another slice of life among restless French folk centers on a married, part-time gigolo (Eric Caravaca) and his latest divorcee customer (Nathalie Baye) and how their widening relationship affects both sets of friends and family. Warm reviews met this rich character study, which prefers to dabble in minds and not bodies. The wonderful Baye made this film before starring in Tsai Ming-liang's (蔡明亮) *Face* (臉). French title: *Clienté*.



### Wheat (長平大戰之麥田)

What first might appear to be another tiresome period costumer about one of the millions of battles in China's history turns out to be something rather different. Two deserters from the Qin army in the Warring States period lucklessly find themselves in an enemy town whose men are away fighting. Their lies and ingratiations with the women gradually wear thin — especially as others arrive with contradictory news. This meticulously photographed drama-comedy is structured around elemental themes, of which wheat, the local crop, is prominent. Directed by He Ping (何平), who made *The Swordsman in Double Flag Town* (雙旗鎮刀客).



### Lehuo festival

Tomorrow and Sunday the Spot theater is running a festival that includes rare screenings of Taiwanese short features and idiosyncratic foreign films such as *Rage*, *The Cats of Mirikitani* and Naoko Oigami's *Megane*. Entry is free.



### Taipei County Film Festival

The Taipei County Government is screening a series of local and foreign films, including documentaries, in hardtops and on the road for another week. Outdoor screenings are free. See [tcff.era.com.tw/eng/eng02.html](http://tcff.era.com.tw/eng/eng02.html) for details in English of indoor screenings. There's also a related exhibition at the county government building in Banciao.