

FILM REVIEW

Director Hakon Liu's feature debut tells a story about a Swedish mother and son who embark on a soul-searching journey Taiwan

BY HO YI
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Aged 17, Norwegian-Taiwanese Hakon Liu (劉漢威) left his home in the countryside of Pingtung to begin a new life in Scandinavia. He returned to Taiwan last year to film his directorial feature debut, a story about a Swedish mother and son who journey to the subtropical country to heal their estranged relationship.

The result is *Miss Kicki* (霓虹心), a Taiwanese-Swedish co-production tailor-made for Cannes-winning Swedish actress Pernilla August, known for her roles in Ingmar Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander* and more recently in *Star Wars*.

Played by August, Kicki, 49, lives in a bleak apartment in Sweden and seeks comfort in cheap wine and cyber chat. She has a teenage son, Viktor (Ludwig Palmell), who was raised by his grandmother while his mother lived in the US for 12 years.

To get acquainted with her estranged son, Kicki takes Viktor on vacation to Taiwan. Her ulterior motive, though, is to meet Mr Chang, a Taiwanese businessman (Eric Tsang, 曾志偉) with whom she has been conducting an Internet romance.

Once in Taipei, Kicki is too nervous to meet her cyber Romeo in person and spends the days boozing and flirting with the hotel clerk (played by comedian Ken Lin (林曉恆), better known as A-ken (阿Ken)). Left alone, Viktor roams the city and strikes up a friendship with Didi (Huang He River, 黃河). Meanwhile, the mother and son drift further apart.

The story then takes a rather abrupt turn with a series of misadventures that involve the kidnapping of Huang and Viktor by local hooligans, jolting Kicki into action.

Like its meandering protagonists, the story is episodic and at times patchy. When director Liu is at his most capable, the film excels in casting a tender gaze at the two strangers struggling to find love and a sense of belonging in an alien landscape.

Some of the movie's narrative devices, such as the abduction, are too convenient to elicit dramatic conflict and propel the story forward. It feels as if too much footage was edited out to make the plot fully realized.

The strong cast sustains the film with honest performances. August is a pleasure to watch as



There and back again

she makes what could have been a disagreeable character a real human being and a mother racked with guilt, too scared to let her son love her.

Though surrounded by accomplished thespians, Palmell and Huang are able to hold their own and convey a genuine sense of youth on the cusp of sexual experience. Another surprise is local comedian A-ken, who in his scenes with August admirably walks the thin line between flirtation and mutual comfort and understanding.

Through Liu's lens, Taiwan is an arresting collage of the old and new. On the one hand, there is the capital's ultra-modern Taipei 101

building and luxurious villa in Sun Moon Lake (日月潭). On the other, the seedy hotel hidden in a small alley near Huaxi Street (華西街) is reminiscent of the area's shady past, while a deserted hotel complex in Sanjhih (三芝), Taipei County, serves as an atmospheric hideaway for the two young men to explore their budding homosexual love.

Sometimes, it takes a traveler's eye to bring to life a locale's unnoticed characteristics. Liu finds poetry in Taiwan's contrasting landscapes, where the film's characters gain deep personal insight and learn what to cherish most in life.



Huang He River, left, Ludwig Palmell, center and Cannes-winning Swedish actress Pernilla August star in *Miss Kicki*, Taiwan-born director Hakon Liu's feature debut.

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Film Notes

MISS KICKI
霓虹心

DIRECTED BY:
HAKON LIU (劉漢威)

STARRING:
PERNILLA AUGUST AS KICKI, LUDWIG PALMELL AS VIKTOR, HUANG HE RIVER (黃河) AS DIDI, ERIC TSANG (曾志偉) AS MR CHANG, KEN LIN (林曉恆) AS HOTEL CLERK

RUNNING TIME:
85 MINUTES

LANGUAGE:
IN ENGLISH, SWEDISH AND MANDARIN WITH CHINESE AND ENGLISH SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY