

FILM REVIEW

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

After 10 years of frustrating production and roughly NT\$710 million spent, Hong Kong director Teddy Chan's (陳德森) *Bodyguards and Assassins* (十月圍城) has finally hit the big screen. With a star-studded ensemble cast, ace production values and an action-packed, pseudo-historical story about a group of kung fu fighters on a mission to protect revolutionary leader Sun Yat-sen (孫中山) from the Qing court's assassins in 1905 Hong Kong, it looks set to be a solid blockbuster. Unfortunately, there is one major flaw: Chan's attempt to strike a balance between action and drama doesn't flourish, making the film a merely adequate choice of entertainment for the holiday season.

The plot is simple: Sun Yat-sen — Zhang Hanyu (張涵予) in heavy makeup — is about to arrive in Hong Kong to meet with other revolutionary leaders and plot the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty. To ensure Sun's safety, activist Chen Shao-bai (Tony Leung Ka-fai, 梁家輝) turns to his friend Li Yue-tang (Wang Xueqi, 王學圻), a successful businessman who is

not a revolutionary, to fund an anti-assassination operation.

Meanwhile, the Qing court sends General Xiao-guo (Hu Jun, 胡軍) and a gang of nasty royal assassins to hunt down Sun. They first slaughter a group of soldiers who are charged with protecting Sun and manage to kidnap Chen.

Li awakens to his revolutionary duty and recruits a ramshackle group of bodyguards to protect Sun. They include Li's loyal rickshaw driver Ah Si (Nicholas Tse, 謝霆鋒), street vendor and former Shaolin monk Stinky Tofu (NBA player Mengke Bateer), aristocrat-turned-beggar Prince Lau (Leon Lai, 黎明) and gambling addict Chung-yang (Donnie Yen, 甄子丹).

With the assassins surrounding Hong Kong's Central district ready to attack and the colonial police ordered to turn a blind eye to the assassination attempt, Sun's bodyguards know they have to fight to the last man to get the revolutionary leader out of Hong Kong alive.

For Yen's fans, there is a long wait to see the martial arts star unleash his awesome

kung fu talent on the bad guys. Director Chan opts to build anticipation for the action extravaganza by cutting the film into two halves, with the first half going out of its way to ensure that enough screen time is given to each of the dozen or so main characters. All have their dramatic moments which shed light on their motives and dispositions. When it works, the focus on the various characters is quite engaging, and it is a pleasure to watch the pretty-faced Tse play a surprisingly convincing simpleton, and Yen as a compulsive gambler with loose morals.

When Sun arrives, the film immediately turns into a piece of action cinema, unfolding more or less in real time as the multiple action sequences are connected together to make a one-hour-long finale. During a running battle through the center of Hong Kong, all of the characters get to show off their fighting skills. It plays out like a computer game where the villains and heroes go up against each other against different backdrops.

There is a rooftop brawl, close combat and a sword fighting display. However, too much use is made of fast cuts and the action lacks punch. It fails to pump up the adrenaline in the same way that Yen did in last year's *Ip Man* (葉問).

Though it is admirable on the director's part to place emphasis on storytelling and character development in what is otherwise a purebred action flick, the film fails in its attempt to deliver genuine emotions. Chinese actor Wang is probably the only exception, and he almost single-handedly carries the dramatic weight of the film through the first act.

Preachy talk about the glory of the revolution also strikes a false note. Leung's revolutionary and his young adherent Chung-guang, played by Taiwan's Wang Bo-Chieh (王柏傑), enjoy their didactic speech on how the revolution will save the Chinese people a little bit too much, and when this spiel is repeated a second time, the audience is likely to roll their eyes and fidget in the seats.

Film Notes

BODYGUARDS AND ASSASSINS 十月圍城

DIRECTED BY: TEDDY CHAN (陳德森)

STARRING: WANG XUEQI (王學圻) AS LI YUE-TANG, TONY LEUNG KA-FAI (梁家輝) AS CHEN SHAO-BAI, NICHOLAS TSE (謝霆鋒) AS AH SI, DONNIE YEN (甄子丹) AS CHUNG-YANG, LEON LAI (黎明) AS PRINCE LAU, HU JUN (胡軍) AS YAN XIAO-GUO, WANG BO-CHIEH (王柏傑) AS CHUNG-GUANG

RUNNING TIME: 132 MINUTES

LANGUAGE: IN MANDARIN WITH ENGLISH AND CHINESE SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

PHOTOS COURTESY OF APPLAUSE ENTERTAINMENT



'Bodyguards and Assassins' is the first film by Cinema Popular, a production house that aims to be China's answer to DreamWorks

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

Bodyguards fail to save the day

FILM REVIEW

Sherlock Holmes, the action figure

Guy Ritchie's latest movie cuts against the grain of the popular cinematic interpretation of the world's most famous detective

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

For those who have watched Guy Ritchie's career from the rollicking high of *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998), through various pale imitations of the same, *Sherlock Holmes*, which is released today, will offer few surprises. It is more of the same, though he makes up for this with higher-than-ever production values and lots of attitude. Depending on how you look at it, it is either too much or not enough to ward off the mind-numbing indifference that one feels for all the characters involved.

The Victorian London of *Sherlock Holmes* is splendid to behold, created from a lush palette of blacks and browns, with an occasional splash of red — ruby lips or crimson blood. Through this splendid set march a terrifically trim Robert Downey Jr., whose self-satisfaction seems too much even for an egocentric great detective and whose smarmy smugness brings to mind the worst excesses of Roger Moore's James Bond. Jude Law's Dr Watson has plenty of potential, but is incomprehensible as Holmes' associate. Nothing is done with the homoerotic undercurrent that is hinted at between the two men and Law's only function is to play the straight man to Downey's comedian.

As a two-man comedy act, *Sherlock Holmes* has some amusing moments, but all the rest is like the mirror ball and fancy lights at a magic show, designed to distract the audience from the essentially meaningless activity that is taking place on screen. Holmes is portrayed as something of a flawed superhero, with a potentially interesting subplot involving the character of Irene Adler (Rachel McAdams), a sexy criminal who Holmes has never overcome. Minor characters such as Inspector Lestrade are used for nothing more than a plot device.

Once again, the laborious setup of various gags engages Ritchie more than any attempt to endow his characters with personalities. Attitude is more than sufficient for Ritchie, and the lavishly presented story has little more depth than a catwalk show. Downey has his Holmesian schtick down pat, but that only elicits a few snickers.

The evil genius is Lord Blackwood (Mark Strong), who uses mysticism as a cover for his plans to achieve ultimate power. His nefarious plot is cleverly constructed, but Ritchie misses opportunities to build tension, as the clues fall effortlessly to Holmes' deductive powers with an ease that deprives his activity of even the

semblance of intellectual prowess. There are a couple of fight scenes which, despite the use of slow motion to capture every drop of sweat, are devoid of excitement, just as a hair-breadth escape from a rotary saw in an abattoir has all the trappings of horror without even an iota of fear.

There is plenty that looks good on screen, including solid performances. Yet there is a feeling of squandered talent as the director panders to an audience who he clearly despises, feeding them the cinematic equivalent of bread and circuses.

For all that, Ritchie also sees the opportunity of a franchise, which is set up with the introduction of Professor Moriarty, who is named but never seen. Clearly we can expect Holmes to return, although given this flat-footed opening act it's unlikely.



Film Notes

SHERLOCK HOLMES

DIRECTED BY: GUY RITCHIE

STARRING: GUY RITCHIE STARRING: ROBERT DOWNEY JR. (SHERLOCK HOLMES), JUDE LAW (DR JOHN WATSON), RACHEL MCADAMS (IRENE ADLER), MARK STRONG (LORD BLACKWOOD), EDDIE MARSAN (INSPECTOR LESTRADE)

RUNNING TIME: 128 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: IN GENERAL RELEASE



Robert Downey Jr. and Jude Law star in *Sherlock Holmes*, directed by Guy Ritchie.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF WARNER BROS



New York, I Love You



Admirers of the anthology *Paris, Je T'aime* from three years ago will rush to see this loosely connected battery of 10 short films by different directors, including China's Jiang Wen (姜文). Such productions usually struggle to live up to the promise of all the directing and acting talent on show, but even in a below average collection there are better segments to savor. Even so, critics thought this effort didn't stack up against its Parisian predecessor.

Gokusen: The Movie



Manga-adaptation time again, though *Gokusen* offers the relative novelty of a female yakuza boss-in-waiting responding to her better angels and working as a schoolteacher with a classful of reprobates. Ergo, this is one teacher you do not want to cross or talk back to, even if she is into impossibly cutesy antics. Subtitle "The Movie" refers to the fact that the film is a crossover from the popular TV version of the comic. Trivia: Nakama Yukie, who plays the teacher with a crime pedigree, has largely been a TV actress, but one of her earlier film roles was the evil Sadako in the prequel *Ring 0: Birthday*.

Ex



Released in other overseas markets as *Many Kisses Later*, this Italian box office champ is a comedy with a cast of thousands and good spirit to spare. The action centers on a half-dozen couples between Christmas and Valentine's Day and how their romantic histories affect their relationships. Massively popular, though its depth is perhaps reflected in the fact that it was nominated for nine Davids (the Italian Oscars) and won none. A remarkably similar American film called *Valentine's Day* opens here in two months.

Like a Star Shining in the Night



A French entry in the deadly-disease-threatens-blissful-romance genre, this one has the male of the couple (Nicolas Giraud) come down with Hodgkin's disease and waste away, but not without the love and carnal loyalty of his fiancée (Salome Stevenin). It's the latter of these that gets this DVD preview a release from tomorrow at the Baixue theater in Ximending, but the upside is its positive message of love — and desire — come what may.

Give Me Your Hand



Held over at the last minute last week, this European co-production involving two brothers and a pretty road trip starts at the Baixue tomorrow. Original title: *Donne-Moi la Main*.

Albakiara



Missed this one last week. An Italian drama about randy youth, *Albakiara* was released last year. If disaffected youth, sex, drugs and rock music is your cup of espresso, get in quick to see it before it finishes tonight at the Baixue. Or wait for the imminent DVD release.