

FILM REVIEW



The rise & fall of the house of Buddenbrooks

Heinrich Breloer's screen adaptation of Thomas Mann's novel attempts to get under the bourgeoisie's skin, but only scratches the surface

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Family sagas do not usually adapt well to the screen. With their profusion of characters and incidents, the two-hour plus format of the conventional feature film does not give them time to develop and they often seem like a race, with the director working frantically to cram in all the main elements. Thomas Mann's novel *Buddenbrooks*, which was published in 1901 and contributed to his winning of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1929, covers the decline of a mercantile dynasty over four generations. Central themes include the emotional price paid by various family members to maintain the family's prosperity, and the conflict between the disciplined life of commerce and the expressive life of art.

the Buddenbrook family. Mueller-Stahl, one of a small number of German actors to have broken into the international mainstream (he was brilliant in David Cronenberg's *Eastern Promises* and was on the cast of *The West Wing*, *The International* and *Demons and Angels*), exudes a palpable aura of menace from beneath an avuncular exterior, and is captivating to watch — when the family business is taken over by his son Christian (August Diehl), his presence is sorely missed by the audience.

August Diehl does a perfectly fine job in portraying Christian, a young man who sacrifices everything to continue the success of the Buddenbrook enterprise. Christian doesn't possess his father's steely assurance, and Diehl hasn't quite got Mueller-Stahl's charisma to fully flesh out this complex character who finds himself suffocated by a Faustian pact through which he becomes totally subsumed by the family business.

While Christian's fate is imposed on him, his two siblings find themselves drifting on uncertain currents. Thomas (Mark Waschke) becomes a drunken man-about-town, totally dependent on his brother's generosity, and Tony (Jessica Schwarz) makes a series of disastrous marriages that contribute to the family's woes.

With the birth of Hanno, heir to the dwindling Buddenbrook fortune, the struggle between self-fulfillment and family responsibility reaches a new level, as the young man dedicates himself to music, and finds himself unable to take an interest in the hurly-burly of commercial life. That tragedy awaits is patently clear, and despite the fine settings and solid acting, by this time it really can't come soon enough.

Hanno is never fully realized as a character, and this diminishes the human aspect of the family's disintegration, and contributes to the feeling that the director is struggling to tie off the story as quickly as possible. Breloer manages to maintain a sense of structure, which has the virtues of discipline, but doesn't have the space to truly immerse the audience in the Buddenbrook's world.

Despite these shortcomings, *Buddenbrooks* is a perfectly adequate film, but like many such sagas, it would probably have been much better as a six or eight-hour made-for-television miniseries.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SWALLOW WINGS

The complexities of the narrative are deftly handled by director Heinrich Breloer, whose experience directing a major German television docudrama on the Mann family, *Die Manns — Ein Jahrhundertroman*, has clearly helped in priming him to key elements of Mann's ideas and style. *Buddenbrooks* certainly falls into the category of worthy film adaptations, and has a strongly literary quality, but as a cinematic experience it is sometimes rather flaccid. This is made up for by strong performances from an excellent ensemble cast, particularly Armin Mueller-Stahl as Johann Buddenbrook, a man whose life is totally dedicated to maintaining the position and wealth of

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

Whip It

There's a real-life *Rollerball*-type sport in the US, but without all the killing: It's called Roller Derby. This directorial debut from Drew Barrymore fuses sports drama, youth interest, updated (pragmatic) feminism and teams of girls whacking each other on skates. Ellen Page (*Juno*) is the newbie in a highly competitive social and sporting environment, but it should come as no surprise that this sassy actor then takes the sport by the horns and hurls it across the stadium. Barrymore co-stars in what may be as big a stepping-stone for her as it is for the awesome Page. Also stars Juliette Lewis.



Alvin and the Chipmunks: The Squeakquel

Surprisingly positive reviews greeted this squeakquel to the lucrative original from 2007, but there were also tired notices that should keep childless adults away. If male crooning chipmunks never did it for you, then maybe a rival female troupe might; this is the chief distraction in an otherwise derivative movie as Alvin, Simon and Theodore do their chipper shtick. Still, some of the effects are great — though they have to be these days.



Old Dogs

If you thought the fag jokes in *Wild Hogs* were the funniest thing since ... well ... humor was invented, then good news: There are more of them in this largely despised comedy from *Hogs* director Walt Becker and returning star John Travolta. Slapstick maneuvers abound as Robin Williams comes to terms with his unexpected fatherhood; he and biz associate Travolta suddenly find themselves babysitting — and the rest you can imagine. This pair of well-loved stars just can't help confounding their fans by putting sub-DVD projects into theaters. Bernie Mac also appears; he died soon after completing work on this project.



The Hedgehog

A girl decides to kill herself when she turns 12 so she can avoid becoming like all the adults around her, documenting the countdown on video and commenting along the way. This pretty grim premise was the basis for a bestselling book in France; here the result is appropriately quirky and loquacious. The girl, Paloma (Garance Le Guillemic) eventually opens up to the concierge (the prickly "hedgehog" of the title) in the family's apartment block and is further inspired by a perceptive Japanese gentleman who makes her acquaintance. Notable for visual flourishes and presenting a child in such sophisticated terms; Taiwanese films rarely allow children such a complex voice. Original title: *Le Herisson*.



Professor Layton and the Eternal Diva

Anime time again, though this one is based on an interactive Japanese video game, not a manga. Archeologist Layton gets tangled up in a mystery involving a beautiful opera singer, a missing persons case, a child claiming immortality and — naturally — lots of puzzles. He is joined by two youthful acolytes in this first of a promised series of puzzling theatrical excursions for kids.



Ting Shan-hsi Retrospective

This Tuesday SPOT — Taipei Film House (台北光點) is featuring another of its interesting retrospectives on Taiwan-based filmmakers. This time it's in honor of prolific writer-director Ting Shan-hsi (丁善璽), who died two months ago aged 73. Ting covered many genres, including time capsule-worthy movies recounting the exploits of the Republic of China's military. The five titles on Tuesday include *The Battle for the Republic of China* (辛亥雙十) from 1981 and 1977's *Eight Hundred Heroes* (八百壯士). There's also a symposium at 4pm. See www.spot.org.tw/time for session details.



FILM REVIEW

Dealing with the devil

The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus is a dark send-off for Heath Ledger

BY LISA KENNEDY
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, DENVER

A wise man chanting in an Eastern monastery wins an unwise bet with the devil and gains immortality.

Centuries into his longevity, he meets the love of a very long lifetime and decides on another bargain with Mr Nick, as the Devil is called in Terry Gilliam's latest artistic fable *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*, which is, sadly, Heath Ledger's last film.

The good but greedy Doctor Parnassus (Christopher Plummer) promises his daughter to Mr Nick when she turns 16. Now Valentina (model Lily Cole in her debut) is on the cusp of that age. Nick, played with a grave insouciance

by Tom Waits, is hanging around and Parnassus is fretting.

Doubling down, the mystical codger and his nemesis make yet another bargain: Whoever gains five souls first wins. Their marks are folk who agree to walk through Parnassus' magic mirror, where they are eventually faced with a decision, right or wrong.

Traveling the more iffy byways of modern-day London, Parnassus and his troupe of actors call out to passers-by from their mobile stage. Many of those enticed by the barkers are dodgy characters themselves.

An ugly, menacing drunk introduces us to the altering magic of the Imaginarium.

Gilliam was in the midst of filming this artist fable (*Parnassus* is a true believer in the eternal power of storytelling) when Ledger died of an overdose of prescription pills. So it is difficult not to treat this wounded work with special care. The final credit reads, "A film from Heath Ledger and Friends." Ledger arrives on the scene



hanging from a bridge. The mysterious Tony is rescued, somewhat reluctantly, and slowly becomes a member of the wandering troupe.

This doesn't entirely sit right with the two menfolk who round out Parnassus' motley crew: Anton and the irascible Percy. The first, played winningly by Andrew Garfield, hankers for Valentina and a life beyond the caravan. The



latter is Parnassus' gruff if pint-sized associate portrayed by Verne Troyer, who has dined often on this sort of mini-meanie turn.

Once Gilliam regained his bearings after Ledger's death, he decided on a solution that makes the fantastical adventure more so. He cast Johnny Depp, Jude Law and Colin Farrell as three versions of Tony, once he enters the Imaginarium.

Their strange yet game performances are a tribute to the spirit of Ledger.

Ledger brings an intensity to the role, but Tony himself is intentionally a cipher. He has amnesia. The mesmerizing performance here belongs to Plummer.

The film is visually extravagant — as suits the maker of *Brazil* and *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*. It begins in an

ancient temple and time travels to the grimy margins of a post-industrial London.

As for the worlds discovered in the Imaginarium, they are dreamscapes, broodingly dark or candy colored. The stuff one expects after falling through the looking glass. And this adventure marks a renewed collaboration between the director and the co-writer of those two wild rides, Charles McKeown.

Will the quasi-Eastern mystic luck out or will Mr Nick triumph? And what will become of Valentina and Tony? The journey to answers is a winding, though not fully satisfying, one.

The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus is a strange trip. It teases with magnificently tantalizing moments that don't quite add up to one grand insight. Which, come to think of it, is an epiphany of its own.

Film Notes

THE IMAGINARIUM OF DOCTOR PARNASSUS

DIRECTED BY:
TERRY GILLIAM

STARRING:
HEATH LEDGER (TONY),
JOHNNY DEPP (IMAGINARIUM
TONY NO. 1), JUDE LAW (IMAGINARIUM
TONY NO. 2), COLIN FARRELL
(IMAGINARIUM TONY NO. 3),
CHRISTOPHER PLUMMER (DOCTOR
PARNASSUS), ANDREW GARFIELD
(ANTON), VERNE TROYER (PERCY),
LILY COLE (VALENTINA) AND TOM
WAITS (MR NICK)

RUNNING TIME:
122 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

Heath Ledger, left, and Christopher Plummer, far left, star in *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*.

PHOTOS: BLOOMBERG