

FILM REVIEW

You might as well live

Based on a novel by one of Japan's most acclaimed fiction writers of the 20th century, 'Villon's Wife' possesses a cinematic presence rarely achieved by literary adaptations

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

It's in Japanese (with Chinese subtitles), and consists of two hours of people battling against the belief that life is a crock, and generally having this belief vindicated. Yet somehow, through some magic that is hard to pin down, *Villon's Wife* (Viyon no Tsuma) manages to be, not exactly uplifting, but at least life-affirming. Moreover, although it is based on a novel by Osamu Dazai, published in 1947, the tremendous performances from the principles, the tightly structured narrative and the deceptively simple cinematography give *Villon's Wife* a cinematic presence rarely achieved by literary adaptations.

The appeal of the film is all the more remarkable given its obsession with the themes of self-loathing and suicide. It tells the story of Sachi, a simple girl married to a talented but self-destructive writer, Otami, who, almost against his will, does everything in his power to make her life intolerable. The potential for self-indulgent sentimentality is enormous, but director Kichitaro Negishi, who has already picked up the Montreal World Film Festival prize for best director last year, handles his material with a non-judgmental sensitivity that allows even the brutish Otami a claim on our understanding.

The character of Otami, played with enormous subtlety by Tadanobu Asano, manages to remain sympathetic despite his drunken bouts, his infidelity, his dishonesty, and his self-pity. He is a kind of poet of death, idolized by young would-be intellectuals, who hates the very talent that makes him so appealing.

His wife Sachi (Matsuda Seiko) starts off as one of those eternally put-upon women so much beloved of Japanese soap opera, but grows into a luminous presence as time and again she overcomes the trials of her husband's behavior — which range from stealing money from his regular drinking house to attempting suicide with a death-infatuated fan. It is indicative of the fascinating twists of this film that one of the greatest moments of Sachi's liberation and



Tadanobu Asano, above right, plays a self-destructive writer in *Villon's Wife*, directed by Kichitaro Negishi and based on a novel by Osamu Dazai. PHOTOS COURTESY OF CATCHPLAY



Film Notes

VILLON'S WIFE
(VIYON NO TSUMA)

DIRECTED BY:
KICHIARO NEGISHI

STARRING:
TAKAKO MATSU (SACHI), TADANOBU ASANO (OTAMI), SHIGERU MURAI (INNKEEPER, WIFE), MASATO IBU (INNKEEPER, HUSBAND), SATOSHI TSUMABUKI (LAWYER)

RUNNING TIME:
114 MINUTES

LANGUAGE:
IN JAPANESE WITH CHINESE SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

empowerment comes when she decides to give herself to a former lover and lawyer as payment for the legal defense of her husband on charges of attempted murder.

The emotional cues in *Villon's Wife* are refreshingly unexpected, a fact that may stem from author Dazai's intimate relationship with self-loathing, guilt and suicide (he successfully killed himself in 1948 aged 38 after numerous attempts dating from his school days). For Dazai, the longing for death was not just a literary device, it was an obsession, and this story manages to explore a life bereft of self-control with clear eyes.

The romanticism of death suggests such poetic evocations as Keats' "To cease upon the midnight with no pain/while thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad," but *Villon's Wife* never lets the audience forget the grubby selfishness of self-destruction, undermining the romanticism that is so carefully cultivated in the character of Otami.

As Otami flounders in his own self-created hell, oscillating from vicious self-assurance to mewling self-pity, Sachi clings on to the baseline of her existence — her son, her femininity, and a vitality that she believes can survive even in the barren soil of her relationship with Otami, who she feels committed to, for better or worse.

Negishi is a deft storyteller, making clever use of elision and mood to carry the story forward at a steady and assured pace. His characters are often confined within the tight frame of small streets and smaller houses, and when the camera opens up onto a beautiful forest scene, this turns out to be the chosen spot for suicide.

Villon's Wife has some fleeting echos of the works of Yukio Mishima, a near contemporary, hinting at a similar schizophrenic response to Japan's defeat in World War II and the crisis of identity that it engendered. While social context is deep in the background of this film, it still provides a resonant base note that also makes *Villon's Wife* an interesting portrait of a nation struggling to find itself.

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

Valentine's Day

Best start with the most obviously timed of the New Year slate of offerings. A huge cast that crosses the generations locks horns with a limited timeframe and a dozen plot lines to try to deliver romantic entertainment for the masses. With Garry Marshall (*Pretty Woman*) at the helm, one might expect a brisk package of laughs and a few tears, but early reviews have largely dumped all over this one. Got a date? Maybe you should consider ...



I Love You Phillip Morris

Now *this* is a Valentine's Day movie. Jim Carrey throws hypocritical Hollywood pseudo-liberalism out the window and takes up his role as a comically shaded gay criminal with devil-may-care gusto. In so doing he might lose a few fans (*Variety* wondered if the film "will give some fans of *Ace Ventura* heart attacks"), but he's also bound to gain some, too. Carrey plays a real-life fraudster who ends up in prison and smitten with Ewan McGregor. Directed by the writers of the uproarious *Bad Santa*, which in itself is a reason to give this movie a chance, but with a warning that the humor will be in your face.



The Wolfman

Romance is in the back seat for this faithful version of one of the oldest — if less revisited — movie monster traditions. Benicio Del Toro is the afflicted one, Anthony Hopkins is his father, Hugo Weaving is the Scotland Yard detective on the trail and Emily Blunt the woman caught up in it all. Few previews available for this one, which usually suggests nervous distributors, and what reviews are out there are split down the middle. Includes many computer animation effects, which would not impress those of us brought up on *The Howling* and *An American Werewolf in London*. But it *does* have Benicio.



Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief

Based on a series of popular books, Percy makes it to the big screen but without the massive publicity blitz and nurturing of critics that preceded the first *Harry Potter* movie. In fact, as with *The Wolfman*, we're two days out from a wide US release and there are virtually no reviews out there save those of Australian critics in an earlier time zone. Percy is a normal youngster who suddenly discovers he has blood ties to the Greek gods, and this is not such a good thing if there's trouble brewing around Mt Olympus. Directed by Chris Columbus, who also made the first two *Harry Potter* installments.



Hidden Diary

A professional woman in Canada falls pregnant and returns to France; there, amid tensions with her mother, she discovers the diary of the title, which belonged to her grandmother she never knew, and whose sad experiences are recounted in flashback — or are they? A sober but searching family drama with more than a hint of wistfulness, this stars Catherine Deneuve as the mother and is a welcome adult entertainment for this holiday season. French title: *Meres et Filles*.



Changing Sides

The other French-language release of the week features another top actress, Sophie Marceau, as a woman who swaps working roles with her husband to save their marriage. In so doing, this crafty couple find that changing sides brings early frustrations but longer-term benefits, but not without a few relationship crises along the way. The swap also pigeon-holes the book on which the film was based, resulting in charges of gross sexism on the part of the filmmakers ... which leads to the question: Assuming the original author was unhappy with the film's treatment of her work, why didn't she have her name removed or changed? (Mme Alaina Smithee, perhaps?)



Bride Flight

Good to see New Zealand featuring on the big screen other than as a setting for hobbits, dwarves and monsters. In this Dutch period piece, three northern European women move to the Shaky Isles to start new lives with their hubbies-to-be, and the intrigue deepens as relationships form and suffer in the process. For more discerning and adventurous moviegoers who don't want to be confronted by headlong comedy, this might be the Valentine's Day pick. Rutger Hauer appears briefly as the love interest on his deathbed in the present day.



Boa

The last three movies this week started last week at the Baixue theater in Ximending as DVD promos, so get in quick if they appeal. The first is a 2006 wildlife-on-the-loose flick from Thailand whose poster gets down to business: A bloodied babe somewhere in the Thai jungle is half-consumed by a ravenous constrictor. Of course, there will be other youngsters on the menu. Really, boas don't deserve this kind of press.

To Live and Die in Mongkok (旺角監獄)

As with *Boa*, get in quick to see this pair of movies from vet Hong Kong producer-director-writer-actor Wong Jing (王晶) that didn't enjoy a proper theatrical release. In this one, co-directed by Chung Siu-hung (鍾少雄), Wong plays the self-conscious style quotient in a strange tale of a gang member who gets out of prison, but only in the literal sense (the Chinese title means "Prison Mongkok"). Stars Nick Cheung (張家輝) as the hapless gangster.

Underdog Knight (硬漢)

This earlier production by Wong Jing and directed by Ding Sheng (丁晟, whose Jackie Chan starrer *Little Big Soldier* starts in Taiwan in two weeks) also suggests that the king of populist cinema is trying to extend himself a little, even if he is hampered by Chinese content restrictions. Liu Ye (劉燁) is a People's Liberation Army officer who becomes a simpleton after a diving accident; he then turns into a fighter for justice, albeit hamstrung by his condition. Co-stars Anthony Wong (黃秋生) as a sympathetic crook.

FILM REVIEW

Brought to book

Denzel Washington and Gary Oldman are bigger than Albert and Allen Hughes' new film

BY MANOHLA DARGIS

NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK
A road warrior of a different sort, the title character played by Denzel Washington in *The Book of Eli* spends much of the story traveling by foot across an eerie landscape, a long and quick knife at the ready. The brown, dusty environs look familiar and not, dotted with abandoned cars and the occasional corpse. When Eli pauses, the camera settles near his feet, and the sky opens above him like a sheltering hand. With his green jacket and unsmiling mouth, he looks like a veteran of an unknown war, a soldier of misfortune — though, given the fog of religiosity that hangs over the movie, he might be an avenging angel.

This is the first movie directed by the talented twins Allen and Albert Hughes since *From Hell*, their torpid, predictably hyperviolent 2001 take on Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's graphic novel about Jack the Ripper. Although this new one has its comic-book qualities, good and bad, the Hugheses have stashed the blood in *The Book of Eli*, making it easier to pay attention to what else is happening on screen. They stage an early fight, for instance, entirely in silhouette, so that the arcs of spurring gore appears black, not red. Like all the fight sequences, this one is highly stylized: Set inside a tunnel with the camera low and the sky serving as an illuminated backdrop, it looks like a page out of a comic come to animated life. The graphic simplicity of this

scene works not only because it's visually striking, but also because it's a part of a meaningful piece in a story in which everything, nature and civilization included, has been stripped away. Much like the land and narrative he travels through, Eli has been similarly reduced. A loner, he doesn't speak much, even to himself. During the first few minutes of the movie, which opens in some barren woods with either falling snow or ash, he remains silently fixed on his task: bagging a pitifully thin cat. His first companion is a mouse (he offers it some roast cat), a creature that proves friendlier company than most of the isolated people he encounters, the majority of whom, as in *The Road*, would like to cook him over a fire.

Shooting in high-definition digital (with the Red camera) and working with the cinematographer Don Burgess (a frequent shooter for Robert Zemeckis), with New Mexico standing in for the US, the Hugheses have created a plausible post-apocalyptic world, one that draws from the western (Hollywood, Sergio Leone) and the tradition of science-fiction dystopia. As George Miller proved in his brilliant *Mad Max* cycle — one of the Hughes brothers' more overt cinematic touchstones here — and as Quentin Tarantino reaffirmed with his two *Kill Bill* films, the western can be reconfigured to suit any number of contexts, themes and warriors. (In one scene, when Eli settles into a room, a poster for the 1975 cult film *A Boy and His Dog*, another post-apocalyptic fairy tale, hangs



Denzel Washington stars in *The Book of Eli*, an apocalyptic/survival thriller also starring Gary Oldman. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

on the wall behind him.)

After hunting the cat, a little human mayhem and a lot of atmospheric preambles, Eli wanders into a deadwood town and the story kicks into gear, for better if sometimes for disappointing worse. The happiest development is the introduction of Gary Oldman as Carnegie, the leader of the outpost. Fortified by his thugs, including some bulging muscle called Redridge (Ray Stevenson, from the HBO show *Rome*), Carnegie keeps the peace, doling out the scarce supplies to the ragtag inhabitants. Among the few faces that stand out from the squinting, scurrying horde are a Mr Fixit (an amusing Tom Waits); Carnegie's lover, Claudia (a sympathetic Jennifer Beals);

and her daughter, Solara (the miscast Mila Kunis), who despite the deprivations, appears to have swung by a Beverly Hills salon for an eyebrow wax.

Oldman gives the movie, which at its most serious veers into lugubriousness, a nice jolt and a flinty presence that Washington can spark against. But the story that the two play out, beat by beat, cliché by cliché, rarely rises to their talents. Written by Gary Whitta, with some rewriting by Anthony Peckham, the story takes a wrong turn once Solara enters the picture, first as bait for Eli (he doesn't bite) and then as his unwanted traveling companion.

Kunis isn't to blame. As Jessica Rabbit says, with knowing wit,

Film Notes

THE BOOK OF ELI

DIRECTED BY:
ALBERT HUGHES AND ALLEN HUGHES

STARRING:
DENZEL WASHINGTON (ELI), GARY OLDMAN (CARNEGIE), MILA KUNIS (SOLARA), RAY STEVENSON (REDRIDGE), JENNIFER BEALS (CLAUDIA), EVAN JONES (MARTZ)

RUNNING TIME:
118 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*: "I'm not bad. I'm just drawn that way." Even so, despite Solara and her manicured brows, and the increasingly pro forma action — Eli has what Carnegie wants, and so the bad man gives rabid chase — the movie keeps you watching and generally engaged. There's a ticklish interlude at a house where Eli and Solara encounter a fine pair named Martha and George, played with energy and inviting humor by Frances de la Tour and the invaluable Michael Gambon. Despite the air of unease and wary glances, when George cranks up a phonograph, and the disco song *Ring My Bell* pours out, you're happily, goofily hooked.