

# Good cop, bad cop

*'Tears' puts transitional justice under the microscope with its nuanced portrayal of a police officer haunted by his past*

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Tsai Chen-nan stars in *Tears*, directed by Cheng Wen-tang.

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For his fifth feature, *Tears* (眼淚), Cheng Wen-tang (鄭文堂) teamed up with Tsai Chen-nan (蔡振南) to paint a dark, pensive portrayal of a police officer haunted by his past.

Though the film is set in contemporary Taiwan and touches on human rights violations from a decade ago, the issue of the abuse of power by the police that it addresses is as salient in present-day Taiwan's democratic society as it is in many other countries.

Tsai makes a rare comeback to the big screen as Guo, a veteran police officer who is divorced and lives with his dog in a hotel room.

The detective is a loner, thought of as cold-blooded for not shedding a tear in 10 years, and feared for teaching his juniors how to extract confessions through torture, which reveals as much of his violent streak as his self-hatred.

Guo takes up a new assignment involving a drug overdose. But instead of following his supervisor's instruction to wrap up the case, the

detective follows his instincts and digs deeper.

The investigation leads him to the dead girl's friend, Lai Chun-chun, a college student who behind her innocent exterior hides more than a few secrets.

Guo has secrets of his own to hide.

In a parallel plotline, he befriends Wen (Enno Cheng, 鄭宜農), a betel nut beauty from whom he buys his daily fix. She bumps into Guo at the hospital while he is visiting her sick mother. He tells Wen he is a friend of the family. Puzzled, she later confronts him about his relationship with her family, and Guo confesses to torturing her late father while he was in police custody. Distraught, she sprays him in the face with a self-defense spray.

The camera then switches to Guo's view and he wanders the streets, passing through Formosa Boulevard (美麗島) MRT Station, built below the spot where the Kaohsiung Incident (美麗島事件) took place in 1979, shown through a series of flickering images.

Fortunately, *Tears*, which the director says is the first part of a trilogy that addresses transitional justice, is far from a political gripe as the playbill suggests. In its sober portrayal of a man living with a tortured past, the film keeps the focus on its characters and carefully examines how an individual can inflict devastating consequences on others through behavior that is condoned by the state apparatus.

For most of the film, Cheng's lens remains guarded and distant, and holds off from passing judgment on the protagonist. The director's restraint is also evident in the film's refusal to explain everything to the audience.

For example, early in the film, Tsai's character demonstrates waterboarding on a junior police officer, played by young theater and film actor Huang Jian-wei (黃健瑋). But the scene's significance only becomes apparent when the viewers piece together the detective's past and present.

However, Cheng's deliberately ambiguous storytelling sometimes confuses the storyline, especially the subplot that involves the murder suspect Lai, whose motives and emotions are handled in a flat, almost elliptical manner.

Throughout the film, Tsai, whose acting credits include Hou Hsiao-hsien's (侯孝賢) *City of Sadness* (悲情城市) and Wu Nien-chen's (吳念真) *A Borrowed Life* (多桑), turns in a vigorous performance. The 55-year-old actor brings an arresting mixture of anguish and cynicism to his haunted character, who lives in a vicious circle of never-ending remorse.

In what director Cheng calls a snub to the dominance of the capital's big cinemas, which he says give local productions scant screening time, *Tears* has been shown across the country at a number of small venues before hitting Taipei's theaters. Those interested in arranging a screening of *Tears* in a public space can call (02) 2720-6007 X15.

## Film Notes

### TEARS 眼淚

**DIRECTED BY:**  
CHENG WEN-TANG (鄭文堂)

**STARRING:**  
 TSAI CHEN-NAN (蔡振南) AS GUO, ENNO CHENG (鄭宜農) AS WEN, HUANG JIAN-WEI (黃健瑋) AS HUNGTOU, SERENA FANG (楊思瑋) AS LAI CHUN-CHUN

**LANGUAGE:** IN HOKLO AND MANDARIN WITH CHINESE AND ENGLISH SUBTITLES

**RUNNING TIME:**  
132 MINUTES

**TAIWAN RELEASE:**  
TODAY